

WIDE AWAKE: AESTHETIC EDUCATION
AT BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

It was the early hours of the morning west of the little sleeping town of Black Mountain (“altitude 2,400 feet” read the road marker) nestled in the Swannanoa Valley, when we spotted the hand-painted BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE sign with its directional arrow along a country road.

—Michael Rumaker²

THE ROAD TO BLACK MOUNTAIN

Let’s try a thought experiment. Imagine a place where general education is more than a slogan, a college built from the ground up to foster the development of the whole person. Here, faculty are recruited not to fill departmental slots but to exemplify the quest for dynamic, integrated personhood. Students are greeted with the expectation that this is a place to confront and cultivate oneself. The faculty and students do not see themselves as the employees and clients of a going concern: they are the college, a self-governing community of experienced and novice learners. The ethos here is experimental. The community has come together to learn from, rather than act out, the stubborn educational antinomies between work and play, compulsion and license, the social and the individual, the academic and the existential. To clear space for this new venture, these poets of the pedagogical overturn many of the basic constraints built into the grammar of higher education, asking, for example, What if interdisciplinarity were a starting point rather than a later bridging? How can we reunite the arts and the liberal arts? How would the culture shift if faculty attended each other’s classes? What if requirements and grades were replaced with careful individual advisement and culminating exams? What happens when you reject the distinction between the curricular and the extracurricular? The result is an (extra)curriculum that nurtures the connections between head

and hands, thinking and feeling, reflection and action, facts and values, knowledge and self-knowledge.³ This community of learners prizes *soul action* in all of its forms and pursues it in every setting. Debating claims and declaiming poems, planting crops and sharing meals, constructing buildings and performing plays, interpreting texts and balancing budgets, faculty and students together encounter, educate, and enact their many-sided natures.

In the shadow of the contemporary university, it is hard to conjure even a blurry picture of such an integrated and integrating institution. And yet, as I will show, just such a place once existed. From 1933 to 1957, in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Asheville, North Carolina, there flourished a brilliant (and flawed and fragile) experiment, a community wholeheartedly devoted to the rigors and rewards of formative higher education.⁴ In Black Mountain College (BMC) we have a concrete, historical example to sharpen our imaginations, a living reminder of a road not taken.

As the epigraph from Rumaker suggests, even during its time the road to Black Mountain was hard to find. Now the turnoff is further obscured by an overgrowth of nostalgia. And who wouldn't be starstruck by a college whose advisory council included John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Carl Jung, and William Carlos Williams and whose alumni and faculty formed a twentieth-century who's who in education (John Andrew Rice, Albert William Levi, and Paul Goodman), architecture and design (Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, and Buckminster Fuller), textile work (Anni Albers and Ruth Asawa), pottery (Karen Karnes and Shoji Hamada), photography (Hazel Larsen Archer, Harry Callahan, and Barbara Morgan), letters/criticism (Anaïs Nin, Eric Bentley, and Clement Greenberg), poetry (Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson), music (Heinrich Jalowetz, David Tudor, Stefan Wolpe, and Lou Harrison), dance (Merce Cunningham, Viola Farber, and Paul Taylor), theater (Arthur Penn and Xanti Schawinsky), neo-Dadaism (John Cage, Ray Johnson, and Robert Rauschenberg), and painting (Lionel Feininger, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Jacob Lawrence, Robert Motherwell, Kenneth Noland, and Cy Twombly).⁵ Everything written about BMC risks becoming the next issue of the fan-club newsletter.

Tempting or not, such hagiography obscures our vision of the not-insignificant difficulties and dysfunctions of BMC.⁶ Worse, it directs our gaze in the wrong direction. Even if we want to praise BMC for the quality of the people it attracted and nurtured, we do not want to equate that quality

with gallery sales. At Black Mountain, aesthetic education was understood as general education. The goal was not to groom professional artists, Josef Albers quips, but to foster “living human beings, or in other words, professionals of life.”⁷ Occasionally, it is good to remind ourselves that there is no correlation between well-lived lives and Google hits.

Consider three central BMC figures I left off my who’s who list. The soul of BMC’s middle years was faculty member MC Richards. While Richards is probably famous enough to make the list, I wouldn’t know in which category to place her. She was respected as a translator, poet, and potter, beloved as a teacher of literature and writing, and influential as a holistic educator and countercultural icon. However, what makes her truly exemplary is the way that her pursuit of personal integrity and a decent life led her to traverse and combine these different pursuits.⁸ Or consider two of the liveliest students from BMC’s later years: the poet, photographer, and publisher, Jonathan Williams; and the writer, visual artist, and prison educator, Fielding Dawson. Neither of these polymaths quite makes the who’s who list. Williams is not anthologized like Olson, Creeley, and Duncan; and Dawson was recently described as the “best St. Louis writer you’ve never read.”⁹ Dawson himself is reported to have commented on the fame of certain BMC grads, “We were all famous, you just have never heard of us.”¹⁰ But, as with Richards, the soul action of each resonates in the intensity, diversity, and dignity of their attachments.¹¹ And, relatively speaking, these are still very public lives. Many BMC graduates left no such records.¹² Hagiography, then, not only edits out the vices but also distorts the virtues.

The trick is to remove Black Mountain College from its pedestal without lowering it all of the way into the dustheap of history. Those of us who want to argue that the example of BMC can help us revive and reorient contemporary higher education are likely to be met with disbelief: How could a college this small and short-lived possibly provide a model for contemporary higher education?¹³ After all, the college existed for less than a quarter century, was never accredited, and served in total about 1,200 students.¹⁴ How could such a model ever be scaled up, the skeptic asks, and why bother, since it proved unsustainable? While it is not usually recommended to begin on the defensive, I think it is best to address these objections up front. Not only will this help me make the case that BMC is worthy of our attention, but it will serve as a good introduction—for, as it turns out, issues of scale and longevity go right to the heart of what the Black Mountain was about.

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Can you believe that something that would be so fluorescent could be so small?
—Charles Olson¹⁵

Let us begin with scale. Was BMC just a curiosity, a hothouse flower, too small to be relevant to higher education today? Anticipating this dismissive reaction, college leadership often tackled it head-on.¹⁶ For example, addressing the BMC community in 1941, after a semester visiting at Harvard, Albers acknowledged the striking contrast. Harvard could boast of a library with six million volumes; BMC's makeshift library held only eight thousand. Harvard had a faculty in the hundreds and students in the thousands; BMC was a community of only "seventy students and twenty teachers." Harvard was "a place proud of a three centuries' tradition"; BMC was a fledgling venture. And yet, Albers concludes in his typically understated manner, "it was not discouraging for me to compare [Harvard's] status after three hundred years with the status of another educational place which has existed for only 8 years, an institution in which I believe."¹⁷

Bill Levi would return to this theme in his 1947 welcoming address. Where Albers tells a David and Goliath story, Levi's tale is closer to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.¹⁸ The giants of higher education, Levi suggests, are suffering from what Louis Brandeis called "the curse of bigness." Their large size is not so much programmatic as symptomatic, a sign of our "obsessive urge to expand," the valuing of quantity over quality, and a "spiral of educational inflation."¹⁹ As Levi explains, whereas BMC continues to experiment to discover what conditions actually best foster growth, Gargantua U "cannot afford to ask the question, how large ought an educational community to be?"²⁰ To wit: "Their gigantic plants, their enormous overhead costs, their top-heavy administrative machinery automatically answer the question for them."²¹ To drive this point home, Levi turns, in Rabelaisian fashion, to the topic of toilets. Imagine that a large university—he uses Yale as an example—did treat the issue of scale as an open question and came to the conclusion that the ideal size for an educational community was 250 souls. Given how rapidly unused plumbing deteriorates, Levi calculates that Yale would have to hire three full-time employees "just to flush the toilets in the empty buildings between Yale Station and Chapel Street."²²

I think that Levi is right to read the reflexive dismissal of small educational experiments as symptomatic, as an evasion of a genuine question

about the relative affordances of smaller and larger institutions. It is striking that those who object that an intentional community such as BMC cannot be scaled up to serve the multitudes are not more bothered by the fact that our current, large-scale institutions are so deeply unintentional and uncommunal. Black Mountain did not fail to achieve bigness. Small size was an intentional feature of this intentional community, flowing directly from its ambition to integrate living and learning and its credo that education is an interaction between persons in process. Historian Martin Duberman, expanding on a remark by Rice, captures the principle well:

A central aim was to keep the community small enough so that members could constantly interact in a wide variety of settings—not only at meals, but on walks, in classes, at community meetings, work programs, dances, performances, whatever. Individual lifestyles, in all their peculiar detail, could thereby be observed, challenged, imitated, rejected—which is, after all, how most learning proceeds, rather than through formal instruction. “You’re seeing people under all circumstances daily,” as Rice put it, “and after a while you get to a point where you don’t mind being seen yourself, and that’s a fine moment.”²³

One hopes that within our massive multiversities and conventional colleges there exist at least some such pockets of genuine community, some spaces of self-disclosure and mutual recognition. The founders of Black Mountain were not willing to leave this to chance.

Let us gather the testimony of two more BMC luminaries who spent their careers thinking about issues of scale: Charles Olson and Buckminster Fuller.²⁴ In a talk about BMC a dozen years after it closed, Olson found himself returning repeatedly to the question of scale. Like Levi, Olson questioned the “bigger is better” logic, suggesting to his auditors that their perception of scale might be warped by inhabiting a system of higher education that had (circa 1970) “bombed out” over the past two decades to an enrollment of six million.²⁵ How could they even comprehend, he wondered, a college that “never had in one moment of time more than 150 people, and at the time I got there it was running just above seventy-five.” “What does it do to your minds,” he asked, “I mean that kind of unit of size”? He muses that it will “bend their idea” if they try to fathom “the amount of water” in that tiny “spoon.” Fuller was also struck by how much was packed into so little, describing Black Mountain as a “‘dwarf star’ college during its most brilliant world-around sighted ‘nova’ period.”²⁶

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A quiet harbor is a pleasant place. But the moment we think we have arrived, we will be dead. Can we be sure that we will be treated as the dead should be? By no means. The deader an institution is, the more tenacious it is of existence.
—John Andrew Rice²⁷

Longevity is another issue that cuts both ways. Does the fact that Black Mountain folded after twenty-four years prove the unworkability of its model? The college certainly had its flaws. It struggled financially from its first days until its last. Another factor was BMC's governance model and intense culture. Its penchant for charismatic leadership combined with a commitment to collective decision-making (through gatherings that were part seminar, part town hall, part Quaker meeting, and part encounter group) led to burnout, not to mention repeated schisms and excommunications. For two decades, the college showed a remarkable ability to rebound with a fresh wave of fundraising and recruitment after each exodus, dip in enrollment, and financial crisis. In the fifties, this elasticity finally gave out. As Black Mountain began to retract into something closer to a writer's colony, it could no longer outrun its debt.²⁸

However, it is one thing to admit that the college's flaws contributed to its relatively short life and another to conclude that it was therefore a failure. This assumes that longevity is an unalloyed good in higher education, an assumption that BMC contested from the start. It was not precarity its founders feared but that "Black Mountain [would] go the way of most institutions, achieving codification at the sense of aliveness."²⁹ All institutions die, Rice suggests in the epigraph; the question is whether they are "treated as the dead should be." A decade and a half later, Levi would strike the same chord:

It seems almost contradictory to speak of the *life of an institution*. New ventures live only *until* they become institutions. It is at that point that hardening of the arteries sets in, that primitive adventure has become mere routine, that former energy has turned into living death.³⁰

Levi overstates his point for emphasis. As Alasdair MacIntyre rightly points out, even healthy practices depend on institutional support. But MacIntyre would agree with Rice and Levi that this potentially symbiotic relationship often turns parasitic. What ensues is a confusion of means and ends.³¹ Though the practice withers, its purposive language is retained to disguise the inflation of means into ends, like the Latin college motto inscribed on a shot glass

for sale in the bookstore. Like Rice and Levi, I tend to fear the zombification of institutions more than I do the mortality of practices. For BMC, renouncing the bid for permanence was a small price to pay for twenty-four years of genuine aliveness. One hopes to sustain the vitality of our educational ventures. But when it comes down to it, it is better to be dead than undead.

Indeed, it was not just a matter of accepting precarity as a necessary evil. There was a positive ethos of impermanence at Black Mountain. From its founding to its final days, this was an educational community keenly attuned to what Hannah Arendt calls “natality,” the human capacity to initiate, to begin anew, to surprise ourselves and others through words and deeds that scratch across the grooves of convention and repetition.³² Academia is not unaware of this existential principle. Convocation, commencement, and sabbatical are all intended as rituals of renewal, and even summer and winter breaks serve to signal the possibility of a fresh start. But rituals themselves demand renewal lest they become rote. Sabbatical, for example, has become just another gear to the grind, rather than a reminder of the scholar’s need for *skholé*.³³ And commencement, as you have no doubt heard, has become the first day of the rest of your cliché. Perversely, rituals meant to remind us that we are beings in process can themselves easily become inert structures, dead conventions.

Rice knew that fixity, natality’s foe, had entrenched itself in the very grammar of educational thought, leading him (as narrated by Duberman) to an interesting architectural conclusion:

the “educated man.” What a term!, Rice scoffed: “educated” is “a perfect passive participle,” perfect because it’s over with, passive because you had nothing to do with it. . . . “Colleges should be in tents, and when they fold, they fold.”³⁴

A college that makes room for the natality of faculty and students, Rice suggests, must itself embody the provisional spirit that continually asks itself, What next? What are you going to do? Who are you going to be? And while BMC never quite resorted to tents, it did both preach and practice the idea that the college itself had each year to be reborn. Here is how Bob Wunsch welcomed students in the fall of 1943:

I want to say now, at the beginning, that while we declare we are beginning the eleventh year of Black Mountain College, we are really beginning a new college. I think we must say this to ourselves each year, lest we begin to let the past become the dominant force in our lives, and already there are too many institutions throttled by the dead and the departed.³⁵

Two years earlier, the college had moved across the valley to its new campus on Lake Eden. For its first eight years, BMC had rented the conference center of the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly. Ideal in many respects, there was one major catch to this lease: the college had to fold up shop completely every spring and set up again each fall. By agreement, BMC had to clear everything from the buildings, storing all of its furniture and paraphernalia in the attic over the summer. This led to an annual fall ritual of unpacking and setting up anew. As Duberman describes, while this work was “arduous” it was also “psychologically valuable”:

The yearly reconstruction necessitated cooperation between the old and the new members, and also gave the new ones a tangible demonstration of the claim that each year the college started from scratch—and that all participated directly in providing its particular shape.³⁶

In fact, the move to Lake Eden spelled more of a change than an end to this ritual. BMC now owned its 674-acre campus and could remain through the summer. But the existing buildings needed to be winterized and a new central building completed.³⁷ Writer May Sarton, who was a lecturer at BMC in 1940, vividly recalls this period of transition and construction as educative in its own right:

The thing that holds Black Mountain together and keeps it from the phinness I had feared is that they are building their new building with their own hands. . . . It is a great sight to see the trucks go down the mountains every afternoon filled with teachers and students, boys and girls. It is something hard to describe to watch Straus, the ex-German psychiatrist with a wonderful head of white hair throwing rocks to a young girl who throws them to a boy who sets them in the wall which others have prepared with a bed of cement. I helped on the wall one afternoon and felt happier at the end, more whole and ready for *thought* than I have in years. And how much better than putting all that into a football team! I don't know how colleges could be re-built . . . every . . . year but somehow or other that's what should happen. We simply cannot afford the intellectual slovenliness, immaturity, lack of reality, and sentimentality which the average college produces.³⁸

Within a year or two, this beautiful new Studies Building (designed by Lawrence Kocher) had been completed, but there was to be no “quiet harbor” for Black Mountain College. With the stresses of the war years, intense debates over integration, mounting financial pressures, and further

faculty schisms and departures, precarity remained a way of life at BMC throughout the forties.³⁹ And its final half-decade was even more precarious. However, for BMC's last rector, the poet Charles Olson, these final years do not tell a simple story of decline. In a pair of interviews just before his death in 1970, we find Olson still wrestling with the question of what it was exactly that he presided over in the college's final years.⁴⁰ In observing that "the ending of Black Mountain is as interesting as its founding," Olson is not making the banal point that both beginnings and endings are important for understanding a story.⁴¹ He is saying that BMC's final days echoed its first, and that you cannot understand one without the other. Olson recalls this final period as days of "grits and hominy."⁴² As the community dwindled and money ran out, the remaining few subsisted on what they could grow. Recalling Rice's camping metaphor, he concludes, "we were in that sense a tent."⁴³ Thus, Olson is inclined to view his selling off of the land as a return to BMC's itinerant beginnings as a renter, a reaffirmation of its ethos of impermanence.⁴⁴

This interpretation is undeniably convenient. Coming from someone else, we might simply chalk it up to the rationalization of a guilty conscience. But this was Olson, the teacher whose mantra was Ezra Pound's "Make it new," the poet who became spokesman for the "open field" of "projective verse."⁴⁵ Olson did not adopt the rhetoric of impermanence because he was forced to shutter the campus: it was BMC's commitment to natality that drew him there in the first place.⁴⁶ In an autobiographical essay, written during a teaching leave in 1952, Olson produced this memorable calling card: "That is my profession. I am an archaeologist of morning."⁴⁷ Echoing the spirit of Arendt's philosophy of action, the projective-verse-like opening of Olson's essay reads:

My shift is that I take the present as prologue, not the past. The instant, therefore. Is its own interpretation, as a dream is, and any action—a poem, for example. Down with causation (except, see below). And yourself: you, as the only reader and mover of the instant. You, the cause. No drag allowed, on either. Get on with it.⁴⁸

Behavior has causes. If all you want to do is react and fall back on routines, you might as well delegate the task to the demographers (midcentury, positivistic sociology was a bugbear for Arendt and Olson alike), who can plot your course for you on their x-y axis.⁴⁹ But you also have it within yourself

to act, to initiate. What are you waiting for? This is the question that Olson was always asking himself, his readers, and his students.

Indeed, like Rice, he posed this “what’s next?” question to the college itself. Before closure appeared inevitable, Olson was already playing with the idea that Black Mountain might be evolving beyond its traditional campus model.⁵⁰ In one of his signature diagrammatic prose poems, Olson imagined a centrifugal Black Mountain College whose “federated operations” would include not only its traditional studios and institutes, but also a press, a journal, a theater, and an academy.⁵¹ And indeed, many of these ventures came to fruition, with BMC’s reach felt from San Francisco (Robert Duncan’s theater group) to Mallorca (Robert Creeley’s *Black Mountain Review*). In the late interviews, Olson is still talking excitedly about what Black Mountain became *after 1957* and about what it is still becoming. He rehearses how BMC emigres shaped other colleges and how BMC alums populated the painting scene in New York City.⁵² He recalls how there was talk of new homes, for example occupying a floor of a skyscraper in New York City or setting up a beach campus in Venice, California.⁵³ He enthuses over new educational modalities such as a traveling seminar and a university of the airwaves.⁵⁴ He describes excitedly a plan drawn up by weaving instructor Tony Landreau, for a fully mobile Black Mountain College.⁵⁵ “There’s three Black Mountains,” Olson explains, “the Rice Black Mountain, the Albers Black Mountain, and this ragged-arse place that I and others were a part of.”⁵⁶ But if campus life grew raggedy in those final years, Olson reads this not as disintegration of something solid but as the expression of a spirit that, while it had been truly nurtured by its “thought-earth” was now “reaching” beyond its home in the mountains.⁵⁷ The “tendency” of this “third Black Mountain,” Olson hypothesizes, “was to find the world.”⁵⁸

On the question of longevity, then, we have discovered two possible readings. If we follow Olson’s line of thinking, then BMC was not as short-lived as we thought. It is true that Black Mountain College settled its books in 1957 and the Lake Eden campus became Camp Rockmont for Boys. But there are more interesting ways to endure in history than as an unbroken charter. On Olson’s reading, 1957 marks not an ending but a kind of transubstantiation, a dispersal of the soul action of BMC into new places and projects. Even if we accept 1957 as an ending date, we should still reject the notion that this represents a failure of longevity. Asked one too many times about the demise of the college, Richards rebuts the premise:

“Why did Black Mountain fail?”, I am asked. It didn’t fail! It lived its life passionately and earnestly; and because it was alive and not artificially preserved, it ceased in due course to exist as a body. How vividly it is living now in the imagination of persons!⁵⁹

BMC lived for twenty-four years, about two dozen years longer than most places attempt truly and fully to commit to an experimental ethos, to self-governance, to fusing living and learning, to robust interdisciplinarity, let alone to all of these things. Two years of such an object lesson would be quite valuable; two dozen is an embarrassment of riches.

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By the term “wide-awakeness” we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.

—Alfred Schutz⁶⁰

I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

—Henry David Thoreau⁶¹

As we have developed this sympathetic reading of the college’s small scale and short life, we have also begun to peel back familiar labels to uncover something of BMC’s distinctive ethos. To call BMC a utopia is to overlook its many warts. To call it an art school is to ignore the fact that the college explicitly disavowed such pre-professionalism.⁶² Even the labels “intentional community” and “experimental college” tend to obscure more than they reveal.

While Black Mountain certainly stood for the proposition that community requires intentionality, it was not created for the purpose of exploring the nature of community. When asked whether Black Mountain was essentially a commune, Olson is emphatic: “When you come right down to the bottom of it, the *bindu* of it, she was a college. She wasn’t some goddamned intentional community.”⁶³ Certainly, BMC sought to keep open the question of what community is; but this was simply an outgrowth of its educational mission. After all, what college would foreclose such a deep and abiding question? Thus, calling Black Mountain an “intentional community” is not so much wrong as it is uninteresting. You can neither create nor sustain community unless you are intentional about it; and communities of

learning must remain open-minded about what community entails. What is interesting is the particular form of community attempted at BMC. The goal was to create a community in which one feels neither forgotten nor typecast, but held in mind precisely as a person-in-process. And by all accounts, Black Mountain did manage to become that rare thing, a genuine space of mutual recognition, a place where one feels *seen*.

We ought to be equally careful when applying the label “experimental college.” Certainly, Black Mountain takes its place in a long tradition of experimentation in US higher education.⁶⁴ Rice says as much in the first sentence of his “Foreword” to the first BMC catalogue, that along with “tested and approved methods of education,” there would be “new methods tried out in a purely experimental spirit.”⁶⁵ There is also no denying that Black Mountain was born out of a desire to create an alternative to a system perceived as lacking. At the center of the small group that founded the college was Rice, a man whose keen awareness of the gap between education and its institutional trappings, not to mention his extremely confrontational style, led to “stormy exits” from three professorial positions.⁶⁶ Picking up the story with Rice’s dismissal from Rollins College in 1933, BMC alumnus Mervin Lane offers this efficient summary of Black Mountain’s founding occasion and impulse:

Conflicts between Rice, a divided faculty, and the administration at Rollins reached a peak of irreconcilability. He and a small group of sympathetic colleagues and students left. These were seekers sensitive to the constrictions of entrenched, hierarchical, bureaucratic inflexibility. They felt the need for a more cooperative, co-evolving, independent, experiential approach to learning, liberated from external pressures and the preoccupation with the apparatus of credentialing. They rallied in support of Rice’s plan to found a small college where the curriculum would be oriented towards the uniqueness of individuals; where no unwieldy administrative, trustee-controlled system would hamper the free interchange between instructor and student; where open and honest dialogue would be pivotal not only to pedagogy but to living and working together in community; and where faculty and student representatives would make the decisions.⁶⁷

So reaction and innovation were certainly part of the equation: reaction against a university ruled by “the managerial mind” with “dead roots in a dead past”; innovation of an egalitarian, experiential alternative.⁶⁸

In the end, though, neither iconoclasm nor the desire to innovate take us very far in explaining what the “experimental spirit” truly meant at Black

Mountain.⁶⁹ First, the aim was renewal, not novelty. In the first bulletin, Rice goes on to explain that experimental practices were to be combined with “experiences which have already shown their value in educational institutions . . . but which are often isolated and prevented from giving their full value because of their existence side by side with thoughtless tradition.”⁷⁰ The point was not to pilot new programs but to break through, as John Dewey would put it, “the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness,” to rediscover living versions of extant but zombified practices.⁷¹

Second, while the founders of Black Mountain did pride themselves on offering an alternative to existing institutions, they had something more ambitious in mind than iconoclasm. After all, those busy patting themselves on the back for exposing what is rote and lifeless in the conduct of others usually fail to notice that they themselves have begun to run in a groove.⁷² Rice and the others set themselves the more serious challenge of breaking through the crust of *their own* conventions. To this end, BMC meetings featured a running debate over what the college was trying to achieve. In the thirties, for example, we find the community wrestling with the question of the pedagogical value of the teacher’s personality, noting that some teachers lack the necessary force of personality to “infect” students with a desire to know, see, and be more, while others fall into a kind of pedagogical “imperialism,” creating disciples.⁷³ In the forties, there was an “explorative meeting” over whether the college should devote the last of its meager annual budget to constructing fences or acquiring pianos.⁷⁴ In the fifties, we find a spirited debate (at one point, the anthropologist, John Adams, accuses Olson of talking nonsense) over whether the curriculum should be organized around the logic of inquiry or the psychology of learners.⁷⁵

Ultimately, then, what makes Black Mountain innovative is not that it advanced a new definition of an educated person (though indeed it was organized around some rare ideals of personhood), but that it was a community committed to keeping open the questions of how we foster human growth and to what ends.⁷⁶ On the default view, an experimental program or institution is about beta-testing remedies to the problems at Big Standard U. By contrast, BMC was devoted to an ongoing effort to maintain a freshness of pedagogical vision.

However, even this fails to capture fully the spirit of experimentalism at Black Mountain. First and foremost, what the college offered was not

an experimental curriculum but a curriculum of experimentation.⁷⁷ A consistent animating principle of the evolving curriculum was the creation of spaces where students (including faculty as lead learners) could pursue learning at the growing edge of experience. Maintaining a freshness of pedagogical vision was part of the larger effort, evoked in the epigraphs from Richards, Thoreau, and Schutz, to shake off somnolence and wake up to life. Rice captures this Thoreauvian educational ideal in his own memorable epigram. Critiquing the neo-scholastic “fundamentalism” of his contemporary, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Rice concludes, “When every day offers the adventure of seeking the word for the meaning rather than the meaning for the word, when action and word merge and become one, then shall we have the higher learning in America, and not before.”⁷⁸ And this experiential or, perhaps better, existential ethos ran through the college’s history from its early years (“I want to open eyes,” Albers declared upon arriving at Black Mountain) to its final period (“Find out for yourself,” was Olson’s refrain).⁷⁹

We can bring home the distinction between experimenting on education and education as experimentation by contrasting two cases, each involving only one of these forms of experimentation. First, consider the recent wave of enthusiasm around Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as a form of “disruptive innovation.”⁸⁰ Though MOOCs are experimental in the default sense—testing out a large-enrollment, virtual alternative to the selective, residential model—there is nothing particularly experimental about the experience they offer to students.⁸¹ The second case is hypothetical. Imagine that, by agreement, all universities decided to adopt a formative, experiential model, not unlike the one at Black Mountain. Over time, college would come to be understood as a process driven by students trying to make sense of themselves and their world, as, in the words of Michael Oakeshott, “adventures in human self-understanding.”⁸² Lecture halls would be refitted into flexible spaces for meetings, discussion, and exhibitions. Standing courses and assigned readings would be phased out, replaced by reading groups tailored to support student inquiries. Tests would be scrapped in favor of genuinely searching essays, inspired by Ezra Pound’s injunction to “[make] your own survey.”⁸³ The professoriate would have to climb down from the bell curve onto the unpredictable terrain of Socratic dialogue, shifting from the roles of instructor and examiner to those of gadfly, matchmaker, midwife, and intellectual companion.⁸⁴ Before I get further carried away by the details, let me state the moral of the story. In

this counterfactual world, all universities offer education as experimentation but, since this is the new normal, none count as experimental in the default sense. Or, we could draw the contrast between the two cases like this: in the first, it is the educators who are conducting the experiment and educational methods on which they are experimenting; in the second, the experimenters are the learners themselves (including those lead learners we call faculty) and the subject of the experiment is life itself, the worlds within and around us.

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The danger of a history obviously is it appears to be in past time. And as I've said to you, Black Mountain to my mind is not only in past time but is a flag hanging out in the future which hasn't yet been, hasn't been redrawn.

—Charles Olson⁸⁵

Utopias are often only premature truths.

—Alphonse de Lamartine⁸⁶

We call it “higher education” for a reason. The term is not “higher training” or “further schooling.” We are signaling a new phase of the formative process when socialization and instruction must yield more fully to individuation and investigation, when learners are charged with and supported to take more responsibility in determining the direction and shape of their own education. I take this as axiomatic, that higher education is not worthy of the name unless it amounts to formative education, which I understand as the attempt to discover, understand, do justice to, and integrate the diverse dimensions of oneself in light of the realities—the offerings and demands—of the world.⁸⁷ This is a formidable existential task. How does the contemporary university live up to it?

While educating the whole person remains a priority of the *official* curriculum, the *enacted* curriculum tells a different story. Walled off from living, learning is then conflated with “studenting,” the navigation of the bureaucratic system that regulates the distribution of the external goods that have come to be attached to formal higher education. Rather than invite learners to confront their complex natures, the modern multiversity offers them a reductive picture of themselves as repositories of specialized knowledge and as pre-professional trainees. Meanwhile, the not-so-*hidden* curriculum of college life teaches students that they are consumers of information, credentials,

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

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Citation:

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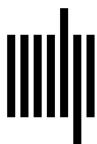
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377607

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Higgins, Chris, 1967– author.

Title: Undeclared : a philosophy of formative higher education / Chris Higgins.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028597 (print) | LCCN 2023028598 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547499 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377614 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262377607 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Aims and objectives.

Classification: LCC LB2322.2 .H487 2024 (print) | LCC LB2322.2 (ebook) |

DDC 378/.01—dc23/eng/20230814

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028597>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028598>