

Chapter 8

Black Mountain: Meteor Among Mavericks

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Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 because that is the year John Andrew Rice was ousted from his faculty post at Rollins College (Winter Park, Fla.) and decided, with a few fellow mavericks, to start something that better satisfied his ideas about education. In fact, 1933 turned out to be a banner year for endings and beginnings of much greater note than Rice's termination at Rollins or reincarnation as an experimental college guru. It was the year Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany and Franklin D. Roosevelt became president of the United States.

Black Mountain College, as it turned out, would be as influenced by the time and timing of its founding as it would by its isolated location in North Carolina's Blue Ridge foothills. Its curriculum—a collection of classes free of disciplinary grouping—revealed a European influence, in sync with the many refugee intellectuals who left Germany, Holland, Austria and gravitated to Black Mountain. Its tenacity—evidenced by its 23-year survival on a pitiful shoestring of financial and material resources—was no doubt influenced by firsthand experience with economic depression. Its educational commitment—to democratic underpinnings for learning that comes from “human contact, through a fusion of mind and emotion” (Du Plessix-Gray 1952:10)—was reflective of a larger liberal environment that managed a brief appearance before the 1950s ushered in fear of Communism and love of television. Of course, John Andrew Rice couldn't have foreseen all the happy coincidences of timing when he was fired from Rollins for being “disruptive of peace and harmony” (Duberman 1972:19). Charges leveled at the charismatic but often arrogant and outspoken professor ranged from the personal (he was seen in a jock strap on the beach) to the professional (he conducted discussions on sex and religion when he was supposed to be teaching Latin and Greek). Given the affection he garnered among students, these charges were probably true. Still, his keen intellect was rarely softened by humility; nor was his quick sense of humor blunted by humane sensitivity. He polarized colleagues into camps of fierce supporters and determined enemies. He cinched the request for his resignation when he became the most outspoken critic of the new “eight hour day” curriculum plan installed by Rollins' president Hamilton Holt. Although Rice was later vindicated by an AAUP appeals investigation headed by Johns Hopkins philosopher Arthur Lovejoy, the incident sparked the dismissal of two other Rollins faculty members and the resignation in protest of another five.

While Rice pondered his future, dissident Rollins faculty and students encouraged him to experiment with some of his ideas about education in a new setting. Even his brother-in-law, Swarthmore president Frank Aydelotte, urged him to start an experimental college. But the idea didn't gain Rice's commitment

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until Bob Wunsch, fellow Rollins dissident and drama teacher, showed him a potential site near the town of Black Mountain, N.C. The collection of buildings, tucked into the Blue Ridge foothills and overlooking an expansive valley, was used as a summer conference setting by the Blue Ridge Assembly of the Protestant Church. Dominated by the white-columned, plantation-styled Robert E. Lee Hall, the cluster of meeting areas and living quarters were vacant 9 months of the year.

Over the summer, Rice and three other former Rollins faculty members launched a road trip and letter writing campaign to raise funds for rent at the Black Mountain site and recruit a first group of students and faculty. With \$10,000 from J. Malcolm Forbes (a former Rollins faculty member who had left several years before Rice), rent was secured and the college opened its doors with 22 students, and 12 faculty. Available courses included physics, chemistry, economics, German, French, classics, English, psychology, drama, music and art.

Philosophy on a Mountain

Rice and his colleagues had stronger convictions about how a college should operate than about how and what students might learn. Democracy would be paramount in the administration of the college, and structure would be loose. Students and faculty joined in marathon, long-winded decision-making meetings with decisions ranging from a faculty termination to a library acquisition.

Particularly prominent, and vital to the democratic underpinnings envisioned by Rice, was the absence of any outside governing body. Rice had determined that control exerted by boards of trustees and college presidents rendered faculty participation meaningless, limiting faculty to debate, “with pitiable passion, the questions of hours, credits, cuts. . . They bring the full force of their manhood to bear on trivialities. They know within themselves that they can roam at will only among minutiae of no importance” (Adamic, 1938:624). The faculty did establish a three-member “Board of Fellows,” elected from among them and charged with running the business affairs of the College. Within a year, a student member was added to the Board. The office of rector, also elected by the faculty, called for a 1-year term (although succession by the incumbent was allowed) by a faculty member who was largely responsible for calling meetings and setting agendas. This assignment did not fall to John Andrew Rice until Black Mountain’s second year, since faculty members agreed that in 1933 he might still be tainted by the widely-publicized events at Rollins. A more pure form of democracy developed in the realm of faculty economic status. The first year, all were equally unpaid and received only room and board in return for their services. When minimal salaries were granted in later years, they varied only by small extra amounts for those who had families (except for Josef Albers who doubled his salary amount by bringing a grant with him).

The ideal of administrative democracy led handily to the idea of community, although Rice initially was skeptical of the notion. He predicted possible tyranny in the guise of “community spirit” and admonished, “If someone likes to work with his hands, fine, let him. But if someone else would rather walk around the woods, or sit and listen to a record, or read a book, or talk to somebody, that’s the thing to do, not something somebody else thinks you ought to do” (Duberman 1972:43).

Although a strong norm of communal interaction was perhaps the inevitable result of 34 people living and learning together at an isolated summer camp, it was furthered when the students themselves began a farm to help the community. They were encouraged by faculty member Ted Dreier; but Rice, while vaguely supportive of the idea, warned that working the soil should be neither deified or codified. Later he would recall, “Ted had this notion, having been born in Brooklyn Heights and never having seen more than a few blades of grass, that there was some kind of mystical experience in touching the soil” (Duberman 1972:42).

Throughout the years, farming at Black Mountain vacillated from casual group effort to serious contribution to community self-sufficiency. For a while, a work scholarship program allowed farm work in exchange for tuition, with students tending beef and dairy herds and growing okra, tobacco, potatoes,

soy beans and rye. However, this prompted a dark specter of class distinction that proved detrimental to fundamental college ideals. Students and faculty pitched in willingly when faced with an unstructured farming program, but with only limited competence. The most successful years were those which included direction from a resident farmer. In the mid-1940s, with the addition of hundreds of chickens, the College nearly reached self-sufficiency and had enough vegetables left over to market in nearby towns.

At first glance the curriculum at Black Mountain appeared to reflect nothing more than the interests of those who came to teach, rather than any particular educational focus. Behind the diverse topics of instruction, however, was a strong conviction that education should be interdisciplinary and should tap into what can be learned by emotion and experience as well as by mental exercise. In this regard, Rice differed substantially from his contemporary, University of Chicago president Robert M. Hutchins whose neoclassical approach to higher education rested with an emphasis on literature that provided a common stock of learning. And, in every publication that would print his opinions, Rice let Hutchins know it. “Why,” he asked, “exclude from general education all but one means of getting experience? Why include what can be printed and leave out what must be seen or heard? To read a play is good, to see a play is better, but to act in a play, however awkwardly, is to realize a subtle relationship between sound and movement” (Rice 1937:588).

Rice saw too much predictability and doctrine in most of what was then labeled “progressive education” and felt that it required a contrived conclusion—such as Hutchins’ “educated man.” This, he determined, perverted the ideas of an acquaintance he most admired, John Dewey. Dewey visited Black Mountain several times during its first 5 years and Rice was particularly impressed with what he described as Dewey’s understanding that “to arrive at a conclusion was not to arrive at a conclusion, it was to arrive at a pause. And you would look at the pause, you would look at the plateau, and then you would see another thing to climb” (Duberman 1972:40).

As one former student put it, “The stated philosophy was that we were to achieve emotional maturity; as students, we often made fun of the notion, and I’m not sure that’s what we got. But at least we learned and we grew” (Bliss, 1991). Rice would agree, insisting that to stop at training the intellect stops a student short of learning to deal with what he/she knows—“a way of doing things, a method of dealing with ideas or anything else” (Rice 1937:595). Classes at Black Mountain, which might take place anywhere from the sloped lawns to the porches of Robert E. Lee Hall, were highly active, participative and experiential. Students were engaged in everything from assisting Buckminster Fuller in building a demonstration dome to advising Merce Cunningham on blocking for a Shakespeare play. They worked long hours and did their share of reading (current and classical) but when they came together it was in a spirit of analysis that would give the reading meaning. Interdisciplinary seminars met at eight in the evening and were taught by at least three faculty members, with many other faculty in attendance.

If his academic arguments didn’t convince fellow educators of the folly of the neoclassic approach to education, Rice volleyed with vivid current example:

We ought to begin to consider education as a thing concerned at least in part with how people feel. If we do not, somebody else will, and all our structure of thought will disappear as quickly as it has in Nazi Germany. There was a country where the universities were concerned with pure thought, where the keenest thinking of the modern world was being done. And yet not a word was heard from the seats of learning when the house painter appeared and roused the Germans to feeling. While intellection was being sharpened and polished, savagery was going its way, waiting for a chance. (Rice 1937:590)

The students who chose to try out Rice’s philosophy first hand were, according to Lucian Marquis who was a Black Mountain student in the early 1940s:

... an odd bunch. Most were individuals in secondary school—writing poetry or doing science experiments on their own—not ‘mainstream.’ And, I think because of the experience with the

depression, people were more willing than ever to take risks, do something different. (Marquis, 1991)

Marquis spent a year first at University of California, Los Angeles, and found it to be “a factory.” He recalls that many of his fellow students also came to Black Mountain after unsatisfactory experiences at larger, more traditional universities. His wife, Jane Slater, for example, arrived at Black Mountain after an uncomfortable year at Brigham Young University. Although the largest portion of students was from the Northeast, a good number came from the South and Midwest, and some from the West.

In the early years, annual tuition was \$350, and it eventually crept up to \$1,200, but an informal sliding scale existed for promising students who couldn’t afford full tuition. Although the student population topped out at about 90 (in the post-war years), and numbers of applicants never exceeded the number that could be accommodated, Black Mountain steered well away from “open admissions.” Although not always successful, the first objective of admissions meetings, attended by student and faculty representatives, was to weed out “problem” youngsters whose parents wanted to ship them off to anywhere that would take them. However, the school did favor admission of unconventional students over those found to be “sound but dull” (Duberman 1972:266). Grades were far from the determining factor in admissions. Applicants were asked to submit sample work (poetry, research reports, etc.), to provide a personal letter from their high school principal, and to answer essay questions such as, “If your secondary school grades are poor, how do you account for it?” and “If you do not expect to graduate, what is your plan?” (Duberman 1972:77).

Evolution at the Lake

The 23-year history of Black Mountain College was one of few constants and much conflict. Three forceful leaders marked three distinct periods during the 23 years: the John Rice years, the Josef Albers decade, and the Charles Olson era.

During the first 5 years of the College, a solidarity of philosophy and community gradually took shape. It revolved largely around John Rice’s outgoing personality (much intelligence and much laughter mark most reports from colleagues and students) and forceful opinions about education. He was determined, for example, that every student should have some experience in the arts. This translated as at least an elementary course in music, dramatics and/or drawing, because:

There is something of the artist in everyone, and the development of this talent, however small, carrying with it a severe discipline of its own, results in the student’s becoming more and more sensitive to order in the world and within himself than he can ever possibly become through intellectual effort alone. (Adamic 1938:626)

Although he cautioned against the possible tyranny of the community, Rice eventually decided that some group activity would,

...help the individual be complete, aware of his relation to others. Wood chopping, road-mending, rolling the tennis courts, serving tea in the afternoon, and other tasks around the place help rub off individualistic corners and give people training in assuming responsibility. (Ibid, 1938:627)

Privacy was held in as high regard as community at Black Mountain, and while students slept two or more to a room, each student had his or her own private study.

As it neared the end of its first decade, Black Mountain included over 50 students and 18 faculty. All courses were elective, and students tended to steer by their own stars, but with readily available faculty advice and support. There were no grades (except on request for transfer purposes), but the close

interaction among fellow students and faculty seemed to promote a great deal of motivation to study, prepare and learn. As former student Fielding Dawson would later report:

Classes, particularly the language classes, moved fast, and though Flola (the French instructor) didn't care if somebody didn't show up on Tuesday, when they came in on Wednesday, they wouldn't know what anybody was talking about. . . It was free of academic rules and regulations, but that made it worse, the whole burden was on us, and the faculty maybe getting plastered with us the night before no matter, we had to produce. To show up at Fiore's weekly painting seminars empty handed was embarrassing, in fact humiliating. (Dawson 1970:77)

Lucian Marquis recalled the classroom sessions as a relatively small part of the whole: "Class was only the beginning. There you started a conversation that continued through lunch and after dinner. Teaching was a continuous endeavor." Although his studies were primarily in the social sciences, Marquis notes that "at Black Mountain I played poker, wrote poetry and started painting" (Marquis, 1991).

At the end of each year, student and faculty representatives met to decide which students should be allowed back. Emotional maturity was as important as academic ability in the decisions. Students had "lower" and "upper" division benchmarks toward completing their studies at Black Mountain. After about 2 years, a student would gather together some faculty who administered comprehensive examinations. With these successfully completed, the student passed to the upper division. After another 2 years, the student could stand for graduation, which required passing examinations administered by an outside examiner invited to the College, often one of the top scholars in the relevant field. Upper division students designed for themselves 2-year plans of "specialized study." Of those graduating in 1937, one specialized in writing, one in 19th century history, one in art and three in English literature.

The arts at Black Mountain grew in prominence throughout the early years, beginning with the arrival of Josef Albers less than a year after the doors opened. As Nazi fascism tightened its grip, Albers' friend Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art decided to help him get out of Germany with a job offer elsewhere. Albers' reputation, however, was not international at that time, and he spoke not one word of English. Neither of these elements seemed particularly problematic to Rice, however, when he consulted Johnson about Black Mountain's need for a resident artist. He quickly invited Albers to teach painting and his wife, Anni, to teach weaving.

Rice soon discovered what he would later call the "three Alberses"—the teacher, the social being and the Prussian. The Prussian Albers decried the seeming lack of real leadership at the College and the free-wheeling, agenda-less, community-wide meetings. Rice noted later, "You can't talk to a German about liberty. You just waste your breath. They don't know what the hell you mean" (Duberman 1972:69).

Happily, Teutonic compulsiveness proved no barrier to creativity. Albers' classes, like his canvases, were steeped in insight and intuition. He recognized that not everyone in the class would become a competent, much less talented, artist; and when asked what he hoped to achieve at Black Mountain, he replied "to open eyes" (Harris 1987:17). He taught "principles and procedures applicable to a wide variety of activities such as: the need to be aware of everyday objects and their individual properties, the essence of primary experience, of direct seeing and feeling, of problem-solving out of one's own experience; the importance of economy, leanness and discipline. . ." (Duberman 1972:73).

Albers was frequently credited with instilling in students a commitment to "correctness," forming a community standard whereby students writing poems did 13 drafts or students presenting stage productions rehearsed for nearly a year. Still, Albers didn't get through to everyone. American Indian painter Harrison Begay left after a year because Albers insisted he should build on his heritage when he had hoped to develop a new, contemporary style.

As "social being," Albers took part in every possible group activity at Black Mountain. At first he participated out of a sense of duty, but later because he had become a genuine force among the faculty. Also, his status as informal head of the arts program gave him an increasingly important role as Black

Mountain moved further toward an emphasis on the arts. While faculty still taught the natural sciences and social sciences, by the end of the first 10 years, student participation in classes like chemistry, physics and economics had waned drastically. Perhaps the personal choice ideal of students learning when they are ready to learn was simply not compatible with keeping the classrooms full in these disciplines.

Events surrounding Rice and his management of the College further conspired to eventually thrust Albers to the forefront. By 1938, the faculty discovered they were no longer being paid equally, but that Rice was making decisions whereby some (including himself and Albers) were paid at least 25 percent more than others. In the wake of that controversy, Rice led a charge to dismiss several faculty members for what he judged to be poor teaching quality and lack of community involvement. Battles ensued among the faculty that resulted in two dismissals and several resignations. With his wife and his son and daughter still on campus, Rice managed an affair with one of his students, costing himself further support among disapproving faculty and students. As one biographer commented, “Rice’s temperament being akin to natural force, abhorred a vacuum. He sought controversy more than most men seek repose” (Duberman 1972:142). By 1939, the faculty had eased Rice into a leave of absence, followed by a sabbatical, followed by resignation.

Rice eventually divorced, remarried and made a fairly meager living by writing for magazines such as Partisan Review, Collier’s, and The New Yorker. His autobiography, I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century, was published to fine reviews in 1942. He died of cancer in 1968.

Rice’s departure from Black Mountain occurred just as the decision had been made to build a permanent home for the College across the valley on the shores of Lake Eden. Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer accepted Albers’ invitation to visit and submit initial architectural designs, but, predictably, these proved too costly. Eventually, architect Lawrence Kocher consented to design and build a more modest set of buildings. He also taught courses in architecture and design. Soon the whole community was spending two or three afternoons each week building, stick by stick, a studies building and family housing to complement a dining hall and dormitories. Robert Bliss, a student who immersed himself in this process and later became an architect, recalls:

Those were the best years at Black Mountain—working together on something that would last and was essential to the community, finding a profession you loved, learning from some extraordinary teachers. Of course everyone had a different experience there at different times, and everyone says his or her years there were the best Black Mountain years. (Bliss, 1991)

The war years ushered in a different kind of Black Mountain; one where students, and at least some faculty members, started lobbying for more structure in learning, but yet more freedom outside the classroom. Lectures and recitations were starting to occur within the classroom, while cut-off blue jeans and nude sun bathing appeared outside. Influential faculty member Eric Bentley insisted to his colleagues: “I can’t teach history if they’re not prepared to do some grinding, memorizing, getting to know facts and dates and so on. . .” (Duberman 1972:198). Needless to say, with Albers and many of the original faculty still on board, faculty meetings were decisive and volatile.

Overshadowing this dissent, however, was a new program that was to highlight at least the public notion of a historical “saga” for the College, the summer institutes. Like much at Black Mountain, the summer institutes started more by chance than choice. Some music faculty agreed to a music festival sponsored by the College of Music in Cincinnati during the summer of 1944. Albers decided he might as well run a companion art institute for the summer, as well as a regular summer academic quarter and a work program. Organized as a tribute on the occasion of Arnold Schoenberg’s seventieth birthday, the music festival drew several dozen music notables from throughout the country who banded together in the rustic valley to rehearse, conduct workshops for students, exchange ideas and perform.

The art institute fared equally well, with Albers managing to invite a variety of notables who spent their summer lecturing, coaching students and working on their own projects. Typical of the spirit in which

ingenuity frequently conquered disorganization at the College was the experience of stone sculptor, Jose de Creeft. When he arrived for the summer session, he found the place had no sculpting tools. So his first course was one in which the students built a forge and were taught how to make their own tools.

The summer institutes grew throughout the 1940s to include notable talents in art, architecture, music and literature. And it is probably these institutes and the renown of the individuals in attendance that contributed most to Black Mountain's reputation as an art school. Where else could Merce Cunningham be found teaching dance steps to Buckminster Fuller? Or Buckminster Fuller enlisting construction assistance on his model dome from Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell? Or Arthur Penn directing a play produced and set to music by John Cage? Vigorous interaction and innovative teaching attracted scores of new students to the summer institutes, many of whom became so enamored with Black Mountain that they stayed on. The excitement and publicity generated by the summer sessions, in addition to a general higher education population explosion spurred by the G.I. Bill, put the Black Mountain College of the late 1940s on its healthiest economic footing yet.

Still, Black Mountain managed to avoid financial stability. Student turnover negated some of the volume gains. Faculty salaries rose substantially, but grants and endowments did not. Stephen Forbes, for example, who had always been counted on to supply money to the College in tough times, refused a request in 1949 because he was disenchanted with the new emphasis on arts education at the expense of general education. The ability to manage what money it had also did not increase at Black Mountain, although Josef Albers proposed a reorganization that would include administrators and an outside board of overseers. In the wake of arguments and recriminations about the financial situation and how to solve it, a majority (by one vote) of the faculty called for the resignation of Ted Dreier, the last remaining faculty member from the founding group. In protest, four other faculty members resigned—including Josef and Anni Albers. By selling off some of the campus acreage, the remaining faculty managed to save the College and retain its original mindset of freedom from outside boards and administrators, while setting the stage for yet another era in its history.

Charles Olson, a writer who had attained popular notice with his book *Call Me Ishmael*, had taught in some summer institutes and was asked to stay on as regular faculty in 1951. He soon became the driving force among the faculty, most of whom were new since the Albers and Dreier departures. He was promptly elected rector. His presence alone (at 6 feet, 7 inches and 250 pounds) accounted for some of his instant elevation in status. His dominant personality, his natural charisma and his keen intellect accounted for the rest. His ideas about education leaned decidedly toward the arts and literature, with an emphasis on literature. His own writing classes were experiences in excited interaction among students which often went on well into the night.

Unfortunately, Olson's administrative desires and abilities could be ranked even below those of Rice and Albers. And he arrived at a time when administration actually was beginning to seem desirable. Many of the faculty would have agreed with their disenchanted colleague Bill Levi who later wrote,

I began to feel a warm glow at the thought of a department chairman, a dean, a trustee, even a vice chancellor in charge of development! . . . The demon of Don Quixote was forever dead in my bosom, and Sancho Panza had won the final, the conclusive, the ultimate victory. (Harris 1987:169)

What Albers lacked in administrative ability, he compensated for in tenacity and focus. What Rice lacked in administrative ability, he balanced with action and ideas. However, when Olson couldn't manage the administrative function, he simply retreated. His idea about turning the successful summer institutes into a similar series of year-long institutes fell on deaf faculty ears. So he gave up trying to strengthen the regular program. His ideas for recruiting more students didn't work, and rumors that Black Mountain was a Communist community discouraged many prospective students, so he did no more recruiting. When he couldn't get the old sources of development funds to donate (instead, Stephen Forbes called his loan.), he

didn't prospect for new sources. His talent and energy were directed strictly at the literature and writing, including a fine new journal, The Black Mountain Review. This publication was started at the College in 1952 at a time when financial management and administrative leadership were begging for help.

With the energies of Olson and other faculty members directed toward poetry and short stories, the Black Mountain student body shrank to only about 20 aspiring writers by 1954 (from about 90 in the late 1940s). At the time, Olson was embroiled in personal issues that furthered his retreat from serious consideration of administrative problems. Although his wife was still with him at the college, a Black Mountain student who had given birth to his son was in New York. He commuted a bit between the two places until his wife finally left Black Mountain and his student and son returned.

He kept Black Mountain and its shrinking population of students alive by selling off campus acreage one piece at a time to nearby farmers. There was no reason not to short sell. The earlier work program of farming, fencing and building had waned with a lack of commitment and a lack of students. In addition the campus grounds were in serious neglect and disrepair.

The curriculum was in similar disarray, with courses loosely defined and coursework very much at the discretion of the student. "Black Mountain no longer had much in the way of community organization, government, ritual, even cooperation; each person sought his path, did his work, turned to others as resources when in need of comfort, guidance, association" (Duberman 1972:407). The learning community was simply a learning environment where it was as possible for a student to be stimulated by association with a few fine minds as it was to become absorbed in motorcycles or marijuana.

In the fall of 1956, with only a handful of faculty and students in residence, Olson announced he didn't feel like teaching any more. The others agreed that there wasn't much left, and they all decided not to open for winter quarter. Olson, his new wife and his son would stay on to see to the legal disbursement of property. Several others thought they would stick together to start something new in San Francisco or New York. But there wasn't enough sense of community to lay any definite plans, and finally they just dispersed: "People simply got in their cars and—usually after a farewell drink with Olson—scattered to their various destinations" (Duberman 1972:411).

In Retrospect

The vast majority of former Black Mountain students can point to clear instances of lasting influence on the rest of their lives. Mostly, this seems to have occurred through association: with one or two faculty members who made a difference, with a "community" of fellow individuals who were essential resources to one another, or with a new area of endeavor such as painting or writing or farming. Black Mountain, apparently, was a place where association was encouraged. Perhaps this occurred through the relatively small number of people shouldered into an isolated valley, perhaps by a common dedication to the unconventional, or perhaps to the existence of ideals about learning and teaching. At any rate, the encouragement of association with people and with ideas was not the norm in higher education then, nor is it now. Clearly, it is possible to graduate from most colleges and universities today with little, if any, significant association with faculty, students or ideas.

But at Black Mountain, as at other experimental colleges, association could hardly be avoided. Engagement with people and ideas was paramount; activity was rampant. It was social, and it was educational. As Eric Bentley would remark:

Where, as at Black Mountain, there is a teacher to every three students the advantage is evident... a means to the most concentrated and lively interchange that any education could afford. Where the faculty are a separate world the students continue their high-school habit of avoiding study, boasting of idleness, and the like; at Black Mountain, on the other hand, diligence is de rigueur. (Bentley 1945:424)

Importantly, at Black Mountain, the faculty was there to teach and the students were there to learn. Black Mountain celebrated teaching, and most rifts among faculty members concerned teaching competence. Teaching was not something to be squeezed in between more important academic endeavors. Faculty lamented that administrative duties took time away from teaching. Because teaching was celebrated at Black Mountain, it was possible to attract an incredibly dedicated and talented faculty group who worked for about half or less what they could have commanded elsewhere.

Obviously, one has to wonder why the College did not survive. The times changed, of course. Black Mountain's communal nature suddenly looked like Communism to many. Students and faculty who were once content to be on the cutting edge got serious about being on the radical fringe. Other students and teachers of the time just wanted a situation where they could actualize the post-war dream of two cars in every garage. Lack of administrative acumen hurt more as the demands shifted toward government regulation, competition for students and reliance on grants and donations. Perhaps John Andrew Rice's vision of replacing management with academic leadership could only happen in small doses—during the frenzy of enthusiasm for something new and only over a short period of time. It may be an ideal that doesn't wear well.

And, there is the tension created by a few people living together in a remote location:

The peculiar difficulty of the experimental college is that small numbers and community living make every personal irritation a communal fever, a fever which is caught and carried by the students as well as by the faculty. If students have a voice in all affairs, and if faculty and students live cooped up in a valley miles from anywhere, people are going to get on each others' nerves... (Bentley 1945:429)

Nevertheless, John Rice succeeded in testing his conviction that education should extend beyond the intellect to include human emotion. To Rice education should not just address what people know, but include how they approach and use that knowledge. And for most of the students who attended Black Mountain, the test was invaluable.

There have been 1,000 alumni of Black Mountain and several hundred former faculty. If Rice is right about the place of emotion in learning, many individuals probably carried the Black Mountain experience with them well beyond the North Carolina valley. Lucian Marquis feels it has influenced his teaching at Pitzer College, where he is a member of the political science faculty, and at St. John's, where he teaches summer sessions. Bob Bliss recalls once dreaming of an experimental college within a traditional university setting. He settled instead for "trying to get the message across in smaller ways," in his position as dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Utah (Bliss, 1991). Gerald Heard, who first visited Black Mountain with his friend Aldous Huxley in 1937, was so taken with the idea of learning communities that he went on to found Trabuco College in Ventura, California, in 1942. Another group of students started a large working commune in Oregon when they left Black Mountain. The art students have been said to represent a "Black Mountain school" of art, although the label refers more to their early learning than to their individual styles. Black Mountain graduates have turned up on the faculties of many progressive colleges, as well as more traditional ones. It is a reasonable assumption that they have passed on a great deal of what they came to understand about learning while they were at Black Mountain. John Andrew Rice captured this philosophy in the early years of the College, insisting: "It's up to you to make yourself better, and those who come after you still better" (Adamic 1938:640).

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