

THE PARSON COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Much has been written, but little has been said, about that pirate's cove of higher education, Parsons College. I have just completed a year as one of that widely advertised faculty, paid better-than-Harvard rates to forage for salvage through the clinkers deposited in the cornbelt of Iowa by the other colleges of the nation. As the latest year in almost two decades of college teaching, "the Parsons experience" has amused me, frustrated me, outraged me, impressed me, left me with the taste of honey and the smell of ashes.

It has been interesting.

For the benefit of the few who have not heard about the continuing Parsons story, a brief summary. Parsons is an Iowa college then in 1955 had a few hundred students, a dreary campus, and a freshly invested president — a New York clergyman by the name of Millard Roberts. By 1966, Parsons had between

five and six thousand students, a plant valued (by the college itself) at some \$21 million, four vice-presidents, and a good many professors earning between \$20,000 and \$40,000 for an eight-month year. How had Roberts done it? The ploy was simple; he wedged open the door.

By taking students that other colleges did not want, Roberts had filled his dormitories and classrooms. Then he built some more and filled them. And more. Played straight, of course, the numbers game is inevitably a loser's game. Unless you set up the percentage in favor of the house. Roberts, picking up the hackneyed argument that one good professor is worth 10 mediocre instructors, hired one professor instead of 10 instructors. In order to get that professor to teach 800 students instead of 80, Roberts gave him a microphone, an auditorium, a salary of \$25,000, and a team

composed (according to the fluctuating prosperity of the college) of from one to three preceptors, that is, MA-qualified instructors who on Tuesday and Thursday rehashed with the students (or at least some of them) in smaller discussion groups the material presented on MWF by the oracle at the far end of the auditorium. The team also included from one to three tutors (chiefly recent Parsons BAs, mostly wives), who were available for individual assistance to the student. To my observation, they did not handle very much trade after the first few weeks of the semester.

That, in essence, has been the Parsons Plan. For the price of the average high-tuition private college, the students who enrolled for this sort of instruction lived in gimcrack, grade-school-modern accommodations, and generally made money for the college as consumers in the dining halls, bowling alley, coffee shop, and so forth.

How could it miss?

In April 1967, the North Central Association revoked the accreditation of Parsons|

In May, the faculty by a vote of 102-58 approved a resolution asking the board of trustees to fire President Roberts immediately.

One of the airhammer truths vibrating on the Parsons campus is that the college represents the educational pattern of the future. In some ways, Roberts has been too successful as a salesman; the faculty has bought the Parsons Plan if not the man.

The basic ingredient of the Parsons Plan is simply efficiency. Running the physical plant 12 months a year (requiring all students who have anything below a 2.0 GPA to attend the summer trimester). An incredibly high student-faculty ratio. The cutting of building costs to the lowest possible level. The extensive use of mass-handling gadgetry. The retention of a specimen scholar-in-residence, a nationally famous accounting firm, a Madison Avenue public relations firm, a Chicago law firm. A private plane and pilot in constant use by the college president. Above all, the enthusiastic cry of "an open mind" to improvement,

as manifested by a necessity to try everything — for at least a week at a time.

Up to June 26, 1967, the authority for all action in the college was Millard Roberts, a genial fellow, a twinkler, a man who worships success. His attendants in the courts of administration were clearly subordinate to him but superior to the teaching faculty. In general, the faculty has had little part in running the college. While it is blandly asserted that the professors have full authority in the classroom, they are explicitly directed not to flunk a student on the basis of absence. The result is that professors are put in the position of offering what amounts to a D-level course to some students of A- or B-level capacity, and of flunking others who would be perfectly competent to pass the course under normal required-attendance policy.

Accommodation of the student has been all-important; otherwise he might have been scared away, and the college needed him: He pays all the bills. Parsons has admittedly and proudly operated "98 percent" on student fees.

For the past few years, the college has, it would seem, been constantly one step from financial crisis and one step from the heights of fortune, whistling cheerily but inwardly aghast that some September *they* wouldn't show up.

In the spring of 1967, the decision of North Central to drop Parsons from its list of accredited colleges apparently was the needle in the bubble. At first the action was judged by Parsons apologists — among them, the suddenly naked faculty — to be a concerted attack by the NCA have-nots, the enemies of the college who resented its success. But Roberts' free-wheeling style had left the field behind him littered with bruised and vengeful victims. Several professors had, the year before, been deceived by ringers — attorneys supposedly representing the trustees, on campus to undertake a clandestine investigation of alleged abuses of Roberts — who proved to be Roberts' men and who promptly reported to him all the complaints gathered in their interviews. This was but one grievance. Almost

everyone resented the president's apparent indifference to the educational process itself — that is, what really happened to these kids after they were lured through that open door.

Now, with the loss of accreditation, every professor on campus had one more sore point to chafe him; it was not long before Roberts' foes gathered in coalition. Spear-heading the attack was the Professional Problems Committee, an embryonic faculty council that had been slighted and even insulted by "Doc Bob." One evening while Roberts was boasting in Pittsburgh about the college's success as a profitable business, the faculty gathered. By a two-to-one vote, the faculty asked that the board of trustees suspend the president.

The following weeks, while members of the faculty attempted to convince the board, were marked by restlessness. Students' absences increased markedly. Catalogs from other colleges weighted down the incoming mailbags. It was almost morbidly fascinating — to watch an organ-

ism as complex as a college, made up of some 6,000 people, slowly growing moribund.

Then the board of trustees did just the wrong thing. The chairman went to the North Central Committee with the resignation of Roberts, contingent on the immediate reaccreditation of Parsons. But in the position of being offered a head, NCA had to deny the appeal.

Two days later, on June 26, 1967, the board voted unanimously to file an injunction against North Central's revocation. Then, in a split decision, they fired Millard Roberts and appointed his chief lieutenant, the vice-president for academic affairs, as acting president. Less than two months later, on August 16, the board abolished the existing administrative structure of the college *in toto* and named a chemistry professor as chief administrative officer.

Where now? The faculty and staff were required to volunteer to take a salary deferment of from 5 to 25 percent. The fall enrolment would inevitably be a fraction of that of 1966-67. Par-

sons' coffers were empty of all but IOUs. The faculty, particularly by past Parsons standards, was far in excess of the projected need. It seemed that the old Parsons College — the Parsons that had flared through the academic world for a brief season like a riverboat gambler at a debutante cotillion — was dead.

What Parsons has been would seem to have been refuted, both by the North Central Association and by its own faculty. Of course, even, if only a third of that faculty remains, it can be the nucleus for a good, small college of the rural midwestern variety. Whether the administration will accept that deceptively modest aim remains to be seen. The alternative could be complete disrepute, an academic junk pile for the intellectually halt, lame, and blind.

Is it really, possible to run successfully a second-chance college on anything resembling the Parsons Plan? The answer, I think, is a timid yes. The open door is perfectly justified — but the exit door must be open, also. The

students are not the same as at other colleges. The good Parsons student is apt to be a bright, erratic one; the poor student is a mixed-up kid who's not very bright, hates school, and should in mercy be flunked out without needless suffering.

The weakest feature of the Parsons Plan is the administrative apparatus, which was designed not only to recruit the student but to keep him in the college after he arrives, regardless of his academic achievement. A second-chance college is valid only for the student who wants that chance: it is only his parents who want him to have it, the second or third or fourth chance will only be another opportunity to duplicate the failure of the first one.

The second-chance college, then, should be a place not of permissiveness but of rigorous discipline with respect to standards of achievement, offering even firmer guidelines than those under which such students failed to achieve self-discipline earlier. The core courses should be

luxury devotes much of its energy. Group discussion sections should not be a remedial program for those who routinely cut the lectures and do not bother to read the material. The discussions should be the digestive system of the course. Tutors with no authority to compel students to keep appointments will inevitably end up playing pinochle among themselves.

OUR GOAL . . .

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week ago: "No Country and no man ever stands as tall as when he falls on his

Yes, after a year at Parsons, even after a year at Parsons, I do believe in a second-chance college. But the college I believe in does not yet exist, and will only appear as the result of honesty, humility, idealism, and a deep belief in the value of knowledge itself. It will have to be a better college than the "first-chance" ones. — Robert G. Collins in *The Journal of Higher Education*.

knees before God." — Thurgood Marshall, *Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, speech before the Philippine Constitution Association*.