Blueberry Pancakes Please:

A Call for Community on Campus

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Jenny entered my office over Christmas break, poised and strikingly articulate about her feeling of disillusionment after her first few months of freshman year. She had entered the college exploration process with enthusiasm and had carried out the steps of the application process thoughtfully. Her decision about which college to attend out of the three selective colleges that admitted her had been neither rash nor whimsical. Why, then, was she so unhappy? What had gone wrong? Graduated near the top of her class, popular and deeply involved in the life of her school, Jenny had expected similar feelings of connection at college. While Jenny thought she would return to complete her freshman year, she would definitely send out applications for transfer.

THE PROCESS IS UNPREDICTABLE:
The real world comes careening into the lives of our children much earlier and much more harshly, it seems. I listen to so many of my students share their disillusionment and disappointment that college isn't what it's cracked up to be, that it's not the best time of their lives as they were told it would be.

Paul had been ecstatic to receive a letter of acceptance from his first-choice, a small, liberal arts college, just the kind of school all of his visits and research had confirmed was right for him. A two-sport varsity athlete with a gentleperson C+ average, Paul had felt lucky to be admitted and began in September with optimism. Like Jenny, Paul felt sad about what he described as a lack of spirit and disappearing resources brought about by budget cutbacks. He will work for the spring term and try another college, most likely in the city where he lives, the following fall. Paul felt that his college had not delivered what it had promised during its recruitment of him.

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Robert had graduated from his suburban public high school near the middle of his class. He chose a medium-sized university with a solid academic reputation in order to maintain academic and social resources like those he was used to in high school, while also maintaining moderate class size and access to professors. "There's just too much drinking, from Thursday evening through Saturday evening. I step over bodies semi-comatose, passed out from alcohol poisoning. One night an ambulance had to be called to cart off a student who couldn't breathe he was so drunk. It was scary." A typical adolescent who himself enjoys a good time, Robert found the intensity of partying out of control. "I feel out of it if I don't join in and terrible if I do. There isn't much of an alternative." Robert transferred to an evening division of a business college where adults and adolescents attended together. Most of them were working part-time and took their studies seriously, regarding it as a chance to get ahead in their jobs or as a way to advance by changing jobs. A degree mattered to them because it meant more job security and possibility.

A recent survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, revealed that although one in four freshman was attending his or her first-choice college, over 16 percent of them reported that there was a high probability they would transfer to another college before graduating. (*NACAC Bulletin* Vol. 31 No.2, February 1993, p.1). Every year we counselors meet with freshmen who return home for Thanksgiving inordinately unhappy with the experience of campus life that many of us adults had promised them to be "the best years of their lives." A reality at last, college life does not match their earlier dream of newfound freedom from parental watchfulness and curfews. Some of their unhappiness may be attributed to the strain of adaptation and to making a new life in unfamiliar territory. Many struggle to get along with roommates whose backgrounds, needs and habits may be radically different from their own. Many have tried not to wince at the food service's version of *chicken a la king* or studied for three midterms crammed into a two-day interval. Many realized that socks do not launder themselves, and many learned to appreciate the importance of privacy where, in a shared cubicle, it cannot be taken for granted. These and many other adjustments have been called on in a short period of time during which the student is also grappling with issues of his or her own identity in their passage from adolescence to young adulthood.

Many freshmen reflect concerns similar to those of Jenny, Paul and Robert. Others have more gruesome stories to share. Their stories are those of listening to a hallmate's experience with date rape; of assisting a classmate to get help who has just been mugged along fraternity row; of trying not to seem old-fashioned when a roommate invites his or her date to sleep over in the adjoining bed, but finding the scene awkward, of taking a sleeping bag night after night to a friend's suite to avoid such an encounter, but resenting having to do so; or of discovering a friend is bulimic or suicidal. Many of the hard-won, sought-after freedoms of the college students of the late 1960s and early 1970s—now parents of today's teenagers—do not seem to be serving these students well in the 1990s. In his 1987 study *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, Ernest L. Boyer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers) discovered a trend among students toward dorm living. Boyer writes:

> "We found during campus visits that residential living is, in fact, one of the least well-guided aspects of the undergraduate experience. Students are given a room on campus, but frequently they are not prepared for what is too often a chaotic part of campus life. Personal freedoms are generally unrestricted, and thoughtless actions create difficulty for others. Responsibility for residence hall living has been delegated so far down the administrative ladder that leaders on campus have little idea about what goes on in the facilities—unless there is a big crisis. (p. 99)

It is difficult to know with any certainty by what standards and principles student life on campus should be judged. Today's college freshman typically enters college having already survived more academic intensity than did most of us our junior year. Their high school curriculum had already focused on studies at the Advanced Placement level. Many have been exposed to SAT and achievement tests since 10th grade when they got back their first set of PSAT scores. Families able to subsidize alternatives, such as sending their children to compete in tennis matches across Europe during the summer or to translate literature into a film at Oxford, have pumped their children full of exposure to cultures other than their own. Teenagers today are acquiring knowledge of an exotic nature made possible by the bounty on the 1980s in America. Few of those children from the upper middle class have spent summers working a 9:00 to 5:00 job or volunteering time on a regular basis during the year to the less

fortunate. High schools that get caught up in the rush of intellectual excellence, find college placement records and National Merit Scholars that auger well for future admission statistics, but they give little or no care to an education that addresses an adult role in society, within a family, with a time and culture of anything goes—what one might term, at the risk of being thought an old fuddy-duddy, "a moral education."

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Today's college freshman is also the first in some time to see the last two years' graduates from top college struggling to find jobs, let alone careers. When these students were in middle school, they witnessed elder siblings taking entry-level jobs in finance or law that paid upward of $40,000. Now that well has dried up. Students begin college with little or no sense of their aptitude, of a direction to take through college, or even of a way to determine their direction. They enter college with little sense of purpose. College is just what one does after high school, and a liberal arts education is a way to prolong deciding on anything too focused. A student really has to enjoy learning for the sake of learning in order to appreciate a liberal arts education. Too many choose it by default and are frustrated and angry when it doesn't prepare them for a career.

A recent study shows that over 50 percent of college students—a group that includes as many young women as young men—drink "to get drunk." This is one manifestation of the frustration and desperation many college students feel. A free-wheeling, virtually unstructured lifestyle on most college campuses today collides with emotional feelings of disillusionment, fear, and helplessness. They lack a reliable code of ethics by which to live. The result: children who are playing being grown up rather than really feeling grown up.

Unlike Jenny, Paul and Robert, many of us enjoyed our college years in a relatively safe haven—four years relatively remote from life's harsher realities, what Jung has termed "the uncontrollability of real things." We had a different fabric from which to weave our identities. We could explore relationships without the fear of AIDS, sample various academic disciplines before heading into a professional world able to absorb us, and we could experiment with lifestyles knowing that our family was there to fall back on if the bottom fell out. Jenny, Paul and Robert now face critical issues much sooner than we did. We agonized over which fraternity to pledge, argued about the fairness of required chapel, knowing that the authorities were not going to change the rules much anyway, and maybe cut a class or two in protest of the war in Vietnam. But tradition seemed to win out, more often than not (at least at Hamilton College in the 1960s), over the trend of the day; or the most recent students' objections to established policy.

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Here's what is different. Adults were very present in our lives during college. Before the 1970s removed most rules and regulations, adults in authority supervised our whereabouts, our behavior and our choices. Although there were very few, if any, sophisticated structures in place then to give us counseling and career advice, our dean of students knew every one of us by name by the second week of school—something many of us considered a drawback when his station wagon would pull up outside the dorm during a noisy party. Parents chosen by fraternity brothers supervised fraternity parties. At some schools, a dorm mother gave counsel and warning. The very term dorm mother conjures up ideas of nurturing and conversation.

At my fraternity, we were greeted each morning at breakfast by the wonderful Mrs. Pickett as she doled out her notorious blueberry pancakes. Mrs. Pickett was our surrogate Mom. As we made the bumpy transition from dependence from our families, to life as a more independent young adult, figures such as the dean of students, Mrs. Pickett, and certain professors, filled a real need. Blueberry pancakes were a form of care. The current system of resident advisors, usually upperclassmen, simply cannot fill that same need for today's college freshmen. Often it is not that Jenny or Paul need a solution so much as an adult to be there when they feel lonely, troubled, confused, or sad. Many of the students I talk with say that they feel that no one cares. After making their way through registrars, bursars and deans of students often concerned more with discipline than with support, students are left emotionally unattended. Students say in retrospect, that they had no idea how to make effective use of many sophisticated support services available in theory to them. As college students, my generation spent a lot of time resisting the watchful eyes of Mrs. Pickett or the dean of students, but a least we had something to resist. When colleges stopped acting *in loco parentis*, a meaningful authority disappeared from college campuses and from a student's developmental journey through academia. This is by no means an indictment of colleges' current standards or structures, or a plea for *in loco parentis* strictly defined. It is, however, a call to reevaluate those standards and structures in light of colleges' high rates of attrition and transfer. We need to take students' complaints as seriously as we take their praise. Many of today's college students come from dysfunctional families. They would welcome more faculty involvement in their personal lives—for a Mrs. Pickett to be there for them as she was for us. Maybe colleges could creatively employ senior citizens in their areas to serve while also feeling useful and needed.

No matter how experienced and exposed to life college freshmen may appear, no matter how sophisticated they may seem, they are vulnerable and unsure of themselves a lot of the time. The child in them grapples with the emerging adult; they are eager to enter adulthood but understandably fearful of what they will find there. We have done them a disservice by assuming that each of them is ready, or should be ready, for the freedom they find at college. Many have not developed the reliable judgement to get them through the social and personal situations they will find, despite their high academic achievements or verbal facility. They are left feeling alone, confused and unhappy in their unfamiliar environment. This is my call for a community (perhaps utopian) in which a shared campus code of conduct emphasizes courtesy, care and the rights of others, and where young adults interact constructively with their elders who are respectful of and sensitive to the developmental stages of young adulthood. Feelings of confusion and disappointment that lead to transfer could be addressed to bring about thoughtful methods for change that lead to loyalty and commitment to a college community. Most young people begin college wanting to make such a connection.

I am intrigued by the statement of a young woman at DePaul University (IL) quoted by Ernest Boyer, "We'd like you to understand one thing. We don't want the university to interfere in our lives, but we want someone in the university to be connected with our lives." (p. 204)

In her subtle distinction may lie the beginnings of change on college campuses for the all-too-frequent responses of freshman like Jenny, Paul and Robert.