

Doc Meiklejohn's Experimental College

A 65-Year Retrospective



**Being the Last Testimony of
Some Surviving Guinea Pigs**

**On the Occasion of the 65th Anniversary
of the Founding of the Experimental College
University of Wisconsin
1927 -1932**

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The Experimental College

The Meiklejohn Education Association (formerly the Meiklejohn Education Foundation) was established May 26, 1980 by alumni of the University of Wisconsin Experimental College, a unique residential college within the Madison campus, which was based on interdisciplinary and integrated educational principles. The two-year course existed during the years from 1927 to 1932, and enrolled approximately 375 students, altogether.

The Experimental College, as it was called, was led by Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn, a former president of Amherst College, whose educational philosophy was based on the notion that the purpose of education was to create persons capable of intelligent and effective citizenship in the broadest sense. With respect to the specialties and professions, Meiklejohn sought to produce thoughtful persons who would be able and willing to think about the social implications of their later work as specialists.

These goals were to be attained in the Experimental College through the common experience of all its students in the study of the Athenian civilization of the Fifth Century B.C., and, in the second year, the American society of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Weekly readings were assigned, questions were raised, discussion groups organized, and thoughtful papers were expected to be written. Interaction with faculty occurred through periodic individual sessions during which student thinking was stimulated and ideas explored.

So powerful was that student experience, that over fifty years later the Meiklejohn Education Association was formed by alumni and other disciples of Meiklejohn with intent to place his educational philosophy on the contemporary American agenda, and to secure the application of its principles in the process of educational reform.

To this end the Association has arranged publication of a book on the subject, **The Experimental College**, by John Powell, a member of the College faculty. The Association seeks opportunities to present its experience and ideas in various forums of academic and educational professionals where interest may be encouraged and action may be stimulated.

Annual Convocations are held at which topics related to education and public policy have been explored using Experimental College techniques of advance readings, seminar-style discussion, and summarized conclusions.

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A unique development has been the creation of an inter-generational forum at these Convocations in which high school and college students participate as equal members of the community with college faculty and adults (notably the octogenarial alumni of the Experimental College) who may be attracted to the event.

It should be noted that the intergenerational nature of these events has been of extraordinary importance to the young people who attend; coming, as they do, from various cities and cultural backgrounds, to find their ideas valued by their elders and discussed in an atmosphere of intellectual rigor in the pursuit of understanding and the search for truth. The Association is convinced that it has found, and is developing through these inter-generational events, a potent instrument for the enhancement of education at the level of the secondary school, as well as that of the college undergraduate.

Accordingly, the Association is exploring the possibility of organizing summer institutes at which high school teachers might be introduced to the use of the seminar in their classroom work, and to the value of student exposure to adult minds through systematic interchange in the discussion of issues of concern to young people.

The Association has recently endowed an annual lecture to be held on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin to be known as the Alexander Meiklejohn Lecture. The Lectureship is to be administered by the Integrated Liberal Studies Program at the University, and the initial lecture by Dr. Rodney Smolla, on Alexander Meiklejohn and the First Amendment, is scheduled for April 29, 1993.

**Doctor Meiklejohn to the Alumni at the
May, 1942 Reunion, held on the campus of
the University of Chicago.**

I wonder if you all realize how unique this alumni reunion is. For forty-nine years I have been attending such meetings. Always, they have seemed to tell of the failure of the college as judged by its fruits. And, especially the ten-year class has come to be recognized as the symbol of our disappointment.

In ten years, it appears, the influence of the college has been shaken off. Men come back belonging to a non-college world. They have learned other lessons. They have acquired a wisdom which is alien to the beliefs and values for which the college stands. In a deep and tragic sense they are barbarians.

But you, after ten years of "living in the actual world," give me no such impression. If I may judge from the wives whom you have chosen and who have chosen you; if I may infer from your words, your attitudes, and, most clearly of all, from those amazing papers that were read this morning, you are still college men."

You are studying the same lessons, grappling with the same problems, attempting to interpret the same principles, pushing forward in the same human undertakings, which challenged us all ten years ago. And that means that the Experimental College did not die. It lives in you. And it will continue to live, in the only sense which is important, so long as the interests to which it gave its devotion continue to be the basic spiritual and intellectual interests of mankind.

Shall I, as the meetings close, try to give you advice? Certainly not. This morning, as I listened to the stories of what some of you have thought and done, my dominant mood was one of humility. You are wiser than I, if for no other reason because you are younger. You know this tragic, bewildering world as I cannot possibly know it. You can come to grips with it as I was trying to do when

I was young like you. And so I offer no counsel. I tell you only of the deep and abiding happiness it gives me to see you marching on. Wherever you go, I shall wish to be with you.

Excerpted from "Learning and Living," the proceedings of the 10th Reunion of the Experimental College alumni, held in May of 1942. It was edited by Walker Hill, Class III.

The 1989 Survey

Over the years three surveys have been undertaken of the 327 students who enrolled in the Experimental College in the years 1927 to 1930 inclusive.

The first was made in 1942 by John Bergstresser, the former Registrar of the Experimental College. It appears in the very excellent booklet, "Learning and Living," edited and published by Walker Hill, Class III, as the proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Reunion of the Alumni.

That survey covered in detail the status of the 166 alumni who responded, being almost every one of the alumni whose addresses were known. It can be concluded from the 10-year survey that the experience of the Experimental College had not been a serious handicap to later academic success, if an obstacle at all. Baccalaureate or higher degrees had already been acquired by 72 percent of the alumni, with several men working toward higher degrees.

One-third of the responding alumni were engaged in governmental employment, education, or social service with private agencies. Another quarter were in business and industry. Others were in the professions, arts, and a variety of occupations, including a few in manual labor and labor union organizing.

The second survey was undertaken by Dr. Robert Havighurst in 1957 at the 25th Anniversary Reunion of the alumni, held in Madison. All of the Havighurst survey materials are deposited in the Experimental College archival collection of the University of Wisconsin.

The third survey, underauspices of the Meiklejohn Education Association in 1989, was sent to the 73 alumni whose addresses were believed known, and who were thought to be still alive. There were forty-four responses, including some from widows of alumni on behalf of their spouses.

The questions posed were intended to elicit an evaluation of the Experimental College as an educational experience, hence, were open-ended and not readily tabulated. For purposes of the 65th Anniversary Reunion of the alumni, each of the responses has been edited into a single narrative format, using the language and style of the original.

The questions were as follows:

1. Do you think of your Experimental College experience as a central element in your education; an irrelevant episode; or something in between? How would you describe the Ex-College's significance to your personal growth?

2. Was there something about the philosophy and practice of the Ex-College which you wish were found more frequently today?
3. Which particular aspects had special value to your student days?
4. What aspects of the College might well have been eliminated.
5. When you arrived at Adams Hall, were you reasonably ready to handle the program which you were about to encounter?
6. What has been the course of your own career?
7. Would you want your grandchild to attend the Ex-College? Is that kind of education relevant to the 21st Century?
8. Any further thoughts?

Herein, the responses are presented in alphabetical order.

Leslie F. Orear, Class III
Editor