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Towards an Autonomous Antioch College: The Story of the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute

By Jean Gregorek

When the Antioch University Board of Trustees announced in June of 2007 that it was closing the historic Antioch College, we all mourned. Then, as Mother Jones recommended, we began to organize. Our goal was to reclaim the college from decades of dysfunctional government that had resulted in the loss of its institutional autonomy and ultimately its closure. This is the story of Antioch College in Exile, the project which became the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute, an unusual one-year experiment in higher education and one of several strategies employed to save Antioch College from extinction—strategies which, as of this writing, appear to have been successful.

Antioch Abandoned

For authorities whose hopes
are shaped by mercenaries?

....Not for these
the paper nautilus
constructs her thin glass shell.

--Marianne Moore

Antioch College was closed by the Board of Trustees of Antioch University on June 30, 2008, after an intensive year-long struggle to save the 155-year-old institution, long known for its influential innovations in American higher education. Antioch College was the flagship campus of Antioch University. The history of what was first described as a “network,” then a “federation,” and now Antioch University began from the most idealistic of motives, with a directive from the college’s Board of Trustees in the mid-1960s to extend its educational opportunities to traditionally underserved populations. Field programs and adult education mini-campuses were established all over the country, aimed at communities in Appalachia, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.; at Native American reservations; at migrant workers, miners, and prisoners. The Antioch Law School was particularly respected in progressive legal circles. These programs multiplied rapidly, and soon satellites were sending out satellites with a total of somewhere—to this day no one knows exactly—between 35 and 40 mini-campuses (the most eccentric example being the Antioch branch in Columbia, Maryland, which consisted of a giant, one-acre, portable college in a plastic bubble—unfortunately, cost cutting on the air conditioning meant that the temperature became unbearable and all within the bubble ended up poached).

The College’s noble experiment in taking education to the streets (or in arrogant empire-building, depending on one’s perspective) led to tremendous confusion in terms of mundane details such as registration, faculty supervision, and tuition payment; by the time the Board fired the ambitious president who had presided over the chaos, the college finances were in shambles.

In the 1980s, the College was rescued by another ambitious president, who consolidated the most successful of the adult campuses and organized them into a new entity called Antioch University—made up of the residential liberal arts college plus commuter campuses in Seattle, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Keene, New Hampshire, and Antioch McGregor in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Today these campuses provide continuing education and graduate programs for adults in such fields as leadership, management, creative writing, psychology, and education certification. Run along the lines of “for-profit” enterprises, the adult campuses employ a small group of untenured core faculty (most of whom do have PhDs) to administer programs that rely heavily on adjuncts, practitioners, and short-term contracts with faculty at other institutions. The president of Antioch University McGregor, Barbara Gellman-Danley, touted her 2006-2007 staffing of 18 full-time faculty members who teach 750 students with the help of 150 adjunct faculty as “a tight ship and a good business model” (*Yellow Springs News*, June 28, 2007).

In time, the relationship between the liberal arts college in Yellow Springs and the far-flung satellite campuses became tense. The university sought to use (some would say usurp) the name recognition of the historic college, while distancing itself from college traditions of faculty governance, academic freedom protected by tenure, student participation in committees, and a reputation for breeding political activism. College alumni and faculty resented the expensive, administration-heavy university structure and its growing control over the college. (For a full account of the disintegration of the college–university relationship, see the AAUP *Report on College and University Government: Antioch University and the Closing of Antioch College*, September 9, 2009). With one exception (Steven Lawry), college presidents were installed by the university Board of Trustees with no or merely pro forma consultation with the faculty from 1995 on. Eventually the college president had no direct relationship to the Board of Trustees, and the college’s long tradition of community governance was repeatedly bypassed; university administrators, most with no previous experience of liberal arts colleges, issued edicts from on high. Pleas by successive college presidents for more attention to the needs of the college fell on

deaf ears. As one wrote to the university chancellor: “While it seems to me that any university strategic planning effort would address... the specific issues of what it will take to sustain such a distinctive residential undergraduate liberal arts program within the framework of a federal university, the financial modeling I’ve seen thus far has been aimed at standardizing, rationalizing, and achieving equity across the campuses, with little regard for the history, circumstance, or distinctiveness of the college” (letter from President Bob Devine to Chancellor Jim Craiglow, February 22, 1999).

In 2001-02, in response to the post-September 11 economic downturn, the university Board of Trustees installed hiring freezes, laid off staff, and took over every aspect of the college finances. A new accounting method was imposed in which the depreciation of buildings was charged to the college budget rather than coming out of the university’s interest on investments. Certain university-wide liabilities, such as the cost of technical systems and interlibrary loan networks, were applied solely to the college budget, artificially bolstering the claims that the satellite campuses were more sustainable. These structural and accounting changes further undermined the ability of the college to determine its own fate. Between 2001 and 2007, the college would go through six different presidents, and, unlike the other university campuses, had no chief financial officer. The entity officially “responsible and accountable for” the college’s administrative leadership was the University Leadership Council, composed of the chancellor, the university CFO, and the presidents of the six campuses. It became increasingly clear that they had little appetite for the task (Brian Springer, “Antioch Confidential”).

In 2005, the board and the ULC stepped up this micromanagement by mandating a new interdisciplinary curriculum that abolished departments and proposed to alter the teacher–student ratio from 1:8 or 1:9 to 1:15—in other words, to reduce the number of faculty positions. Sold to the faculty as a last-ditch effort to put college on the road to financial stability, the reorganization was a logistical nightmare that had to be designed and implemented in a little over a year. Throughout this period, the faculty struggled mightily to maintain and deliver

some semblance of a liberal arts curriculum, despite ever-decreasing infrastructure and staffing cuts in programs, academic support, and student services. Neither complacent about nor ignorant of the college's problems and their cause, faculty lacked the means through which to make our concerns heard. While some faculty left, many stayed, still compelled by the challenges and rewards of teaching a bright, intellectually curious student body. Indicators of academic quality, such as national rankings of student engagement, number of students who obtain Fulbrights, rates of acceptance to top graduate programs and of completion of PhDs, remained extremely strong, and we felt there remained much to be proud of as we fought to carry on the Antioch legacy.

The new curriculum imposed on the college by the Board of Trustees either failed to attract students, or the confusion resulting from dramatic changes implemented too quickly made it difficult to explain and to market. Enrollments dropped lower; turnover in the administration and the admissions office stayed high. Donations to the college had been falling away. Shortfalls were not ameliorated by contributions from trustees—some appeared indifferent, a few explicitly hostile to the college.

The cultures of the college and university continued to diverge and the presidents of the other campuses came to see the college as more liability than asset. Gellman-Danley of Antioch McGregor cultivated relations with business leaders in the Dayton area, particularly those with connections to the nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and sought new funding sources under the Bush Administration's Homeland Security initiatives. In an attempt to literally detach Antioch McGregor from Antioch College, in 2005, Gellman-Danley ordered the construction of a new \$15 million facility at the opposite end of the town of Yellow Springs, moving into the 6,000-square-foot space in 2007. As the *Yellow Springs News* reported, "Some have wondered how a new building for McGregor was financed while the [college] campus just across the street was crumbling." The controversy that erupted at McGregor surrounding the building of the McGregor campus and the separation from Antioch College was stifled—student newsletters

taken from mailboxes, faculty warned not to speak publicly against the decisions of management. Gellman-Danley made it clear that traditional concepts of academic freedom did not apply under her administration.

In March 2007, the University Chancellor, Tullisse Murdock, a former president of the Antioch University unit in Seattle, armed with a consultant's report that characterized the college's tenured faculty and staff union as obstacles to a more flexible, market-oriented institution, informed the Board of Trustees that the college's continued deficits could soon jeopardize the entire university system. The report outlined three options for Board actions. The third option, that of suspending the operations of the college for a minimum of four years "to clear out the ghosts," was the course of action recommended by the consultants and also explicitly identified as "the one preferred at this time by the university's management team." That June, without having turned to alumni for help, without having consulted with faculty — as they were contractually obligated to do — and without consulting any of the many stakeholders involved in the fate of this historic institution, the Board of Trustees voted to put the flagship Antioch College to sleep.

The 120 remaining members of the college faculty and staff learned of the decision when we were called to a special meeting, at which then-college President Steven Lawry relayed the news that all college operations would be suspended on June 30, 2008. Tenure was voided by the declaration of financial exigency — a condition that seemed highly disputable, given that other university units claimed to be financially sound. Staff union contracts ensured that many staff received severance pay; faculty were offered a year's contract in lieu of severance. Sympathetic faculty at the McGregor campus were discouraged from talking to the press at the risk of being terminated as well. When President Lawry became too vocal about the glaring structural problems inherent in the college–university relationship, his head was the next to roll.

Pleas of financial exigency also appeared questionable given the salaries and compensation received by university administrators. The year she presided over the closing of the college,

Chancellor Murdock was listed as earning over \$532,491 in total salary and benefits (including deferred compensation of \$264,000). Gellman-Danley received \$399,328.

In August 2007, Murdock unveiled a tentative plan for a “renewed Antioch College Yellow Springs” to be organized on the same model as the other university campuses, without tenure and presumably without a staff union. The proposal called for a small core faculty of eight (Antioch College employed 44 full-time faculty that year) to administer a high-tech version of a liberal arts education, linked to the other units via the Web and assisted by virtual classrooms and a virtual commons. Later this proposal was quietly dropped.

For an entire year, a coalition of outraged college alumni, faculty, staff, students, and concerned local citizens of Yellow Springs fought hard to have the decision to suspend operations reversed. This stage of the struggle involved multiple fronts, including a massive alumni fundraising campaign that began with the raising of half a million dollars over one weekend at the June alumni reunion, reaching \$18 million in cash and pledges by the time of the October reunion; a lawsuit filed by tenured faculty seeking to prevent the closing of the college and the seizing of its assets; the formation of dozens of new alumni chapters; numerous petition and letter-writing drives; protests from former trustees; town meetings in the Village of Yellow Springs; and letters of concern from the AAUP. Efforts to rescue the college soon focused on obtaining a separation from its parent Antioch University, but the university turned down repeated offers by alumni to purchase the college. One group of wealthy alumni and former trustees, the Antioch College Continuation Corporation (ACCC), offered \$12.2 million dollars for the college, with \$6 million down and the remainder to be paid over the next few years. The ACCC’s insistence that it be ensured representation on the Board of Trustees was seen by the university as a “hostile takeover,” and so the university resisted the deal, insisting that all the money be paid in full.

Soon after, the university released a press statement declaring the College “up for sale” and making it known that they were “open to negotiations with any potential buyer.” This

prompted a mock ad on the local Craigslist: “Antioch College no longer holds any substantial meaning or value to its Board of Trustees, beyond what it can be sold for on the open market. Offers by alumni groups promising to operate the college in a continuous manner, beholden to its traditional values of openness and academic freedom, are particularly loathsome. Real estate developers with proven military–industrial success are preferred.”

After June 2008, the beautiful 100-acre campus of Antioch College stood empty, its graceful pre-Civil War brick buildings shuttered, the heating disabled, the campus monitored by security cameras which might or might not have been connected. Despite repeated advance warnings from The Ohio Historical Society and concerned citizens of the Village of Yellow Springs, neglect of basic maintenance caused serious damage from burst sprinkler pipes in three buildings over the winter. In spring 2009, the Antioch campus buildings were placed on Ohio Preservation’s list of Most Endangered Historic Sites.

The AAUP’s investigation into the closing of Antioch College determined that Antioch University had violated numerous AAUP standards and guidelines, most obviously that faculty governance at the college and faculty control over the college curriculum were repeatedly sidestepped. As the AAUP report stated, “There can be little doubt that Antioch College’s financial problems were in no small measure a product of managerial decisions made without faculty consultation, including a curricular experiment that was connected to a decline in enrollment; and a decision to reduce financial support to the college from the university” (p. 35). The Association further found that academic freedom at the satellite campuses was infringed upon, and that the University’s declaration of financial exigency in order to terminate employees and eliminate tenured positions remained unsubstantiated. Ultimately, the AAUP charged the board of trustees and the university administration with what amounts to gross dereliction of duty, noting, “It seems to the investigating committee not at all unreasonable to have expected the trustees to pursue the goal (the operation of Antioch College) for which the enterprise had been established... Unfortunately, the trustees and the administration of Antioch

University seem to have lost sight of this purpose" (p. 28).

In June 2009, College alumni at last succeeded in negotiating a deal with the university to regain the campus and the rights to the name Antioch College. Keys to the campus buildings officially changed hands on September 4. This time, Antioch and its history sold for \$6 million.

Former Antioch student Jeanne Kay characterized Toni Murdock's plan to close Antioch College and open a new unit of the university in its place in 2012 as the higher education version of the tactic Naomi Klein names "neoliberal shock therapy." In Klein's account, drastic actions are taken to displace people, demoralize resistance, erase established traditions, and generally "clean house" in order for outside interests to rebuild a national or local economy from the top down. In our own small example, a sanitized "Antioch Yellow Springs" was to be superimposed on the former Antioch College; a greatly reduced clone of the University's tenureless, administration-heavy units with little room for dissenting voices was to replace the College and its messy self-governance. Clearly Antioch's plight dramatizes many of the most disturbing trends in the corporatization of higher education:

A. A consolidation of power in upper levels of administration; the expansion of administrative bureaucracy and "culture"; a reliance on consultants as opposed to available wisdom and experience; a shift away from faculty and community traditions of governance; the abrogation of faculty control over the curriculum;

B. A lack of transparency in governance; a culture of secrecy and closed conversations on the part of Boards of Trustees and administrators; no consultation with other stakeholders in making decisions with far-reaching and damaging impacts;

C. The deliberate violation of tenure; increased use of contract, part-time, and adjunct labor; increased reliance on distance learning and low-residency courses; the undermining of tenured faculty through competition with contract faculty; and the undermining of contract faculty through competition with adjuncts;

D. A succumbing to the "edifice complex": prioritizing showpiece buildings and facilities

over personnel; the building of ever-larger (and often unnecessary) new buildings rather than the rehabilitation of existing usable spaces.

Claiming the Legacy: Antiochians Fight Back

In its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse...

Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community.

—John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927)

The decision to dispose of Antioch College was simply not one that faculty, alumni, staff, and students could accept. In the winter of 2007-2008, frustrated at the university's intransigence, Antiochians began to contemplate taking Antioch College off campus if the new round of negotiations between the college alumni and the university Board of Trustees did not yield a more positive outcome. An ad hoc group of about thirty faculty, staff, alumni, and students met over a weekend in March 2008 and brainstormed about how to move forward, developing Plan A, a reduced campus footprint for the following fall term if the ACCC was indeed able to obtain a separation from the university; and a Plan B, in which faculty would continue to hold classes elsewhere if the university closed the campus. That weekend, the alumni board voted to commit financial resources to the proposed project and the faculty sketched out a budget for a college in exile that we desperately hoped we would not need.

In April, we were crushed to learn that the university board turned down the ACCC's final offer for the college and was proceeding with the closure. The members of the ACCC disbanded in disgust. Plan B it was, and planning for what became Nonstop Antioch began in earnest. Faculty and students stopped attending the now-hollow shell of community governance, the Administrative Council (Adcil), and created their own governing body, named ExCil, or Adcil-in-Exile. In May, following the termination of negotiations, eighteen Antioch College faculty—most of the tenured faculty at the time—committed to teach with Antioch in Exile. Faculty then

worked without pay from May through August to develop a curriculum, admissions and tuition policies, and a detailed budget. An executive collective was voted in, a group of three faculty members who would divide the leadership tasks of the new institution.

As faculty and staff mournfully packed up their offices, we were simultaneously starting to piece together a college from scratch. We scouted around for usable classroom spaces in the Village of Yellow Springs. Churches, coffee shops, arts spaces, and the senior citizens' center opened their doors to us. We found surplus chairs, desks, and blackboards at a sale at Wright State University, while computers and even a high-end server were donated. A nearby bookstore agreed to sell textbooks, and the Yellow Springs Library handled reserve readings after the university denied Nonstop faculty access to the still-open Antioch Library. After the rescue of the Antioch Women Center's collection of books from the dumpster where it had been discarded by university staff, we put together our own library-in-exile, which soon added up to approximately 4,000 donated and rescued books and materials. Staff and faculty joined Local 768 of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America, obtaining a healthcare plan through the Steelworkers Health Fund.

Antioch-in-Exile was eventually renamed the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute, in response to a threatened lawsuit from Antioch University prohibiting us from using our own name, logo, or the letter A in any way that could evoke anything Antioch-esque. Taking our name and our vision from one of the slogans of the past year, "Nonstop Antioch," we saw ourselves as part protest movement, part educational think tank, part holding tank for the progressive traditions and institutional memory of Antioch College. We often described ourselves as the carriers of Antioch's DNA; we also used the metaphor of Nonstop as a lifeboat or raft, salvaging as many bits of the sunken college as we could. With little money, but abundant human capital, we forged ahead, believing that the knowledge, experience, and energy of faculty and staff (some of whom had invested over forty years in the College) were our best resources.

Our vision was nothing if not ambitious. We intended to keep Antioch's professional

educators together and pursue the meaningful educational work we all felt called to do. We also wanted to apply ourselves more deliberately to the creation of a democratic, intellectually and artistically rich community. Another motivation was the opportunity to experiment with new educational directions, with the combination of critical thinking and multiple perspectives inherent in the liberal arts and hands-on, community-based learning. Equally important was the need to minimize the impact of the loss of jobs and economic activity on the Village of Yellow Springs, as the college had been the town's largest employer. And what better way to show, as former trustee Paula Treichler reasoned, that the college did not, after all, need to be closed, that "there was sufficient money to pay the faculty, that students would find Antioch appealing, that the physical plant need not have been so fraught and immediate an issue?"

Central to our educational philosophy was the assumption that learning is an inherently social process with an inherently social mission. Here is an excerpt from the first description of the Nonstop Curriculum, written in the summer of 2008:

In response to the tragic and unwarranted closure of the historic Antioch College campus by the Antioch University Board of Trustees, Antioch College faculty, staff, students, and alumni are creating the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute in the Village of Yellow Springs, Ohio. Carrying forward Antioch's long tradition of educational innovation, this enterprise re-imagines education for the 21st century as progressive liberal arts for life. Our goal is a liberal arts education dedicated to the core values of Antioch College and articulated succinctly in its Honor Code as 'the search for truth, the development of individual potential, and the pursuit of social justice.' The Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute takes these Antiochian ideals into 'exile' with the intent of reinvigorating them in new contexts and environments.

The Institute is based in the Village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, a place with a long legacy of forward thinking, openness to diversity, and tolerance. Significant aspects of our educational curriculum are inspired by the interests and needs of the immediate community and its

environment. Indeed, the curriculum of the Institute is distinctive in its historically unprecedented level of integration into, and collaboration with, the surrounding community.

Nonstop's nurturing of a relationship with the Yellow Springs community and its careful stewardship of the college in exile were designed to be a marked contrast to the university's indifference toward the historic campus and its environs. We consciously embraced the concept of a turn to the local, asking, "What would it mean to join the insights of 'relocalization' movements to the goals of a liberal arts education? How can we build upon existing local specializations and strengths, highlight and preserve local distinctiveness? What partnerships can we develop with local groups and organizations? With whom can we share facilities, spaces, and resources? What contributions can we make to the solving of particular local problems? What contributions can we make to the cultural and intellectual life of the area? What would it look like to create an educational commons?" Our curricular directions came from necessity (our small size and shoestring budget) but were also inspired by the challenges facing Yellow Springs—an environmentally safe power supply, clean water, smart growth without sprawl, affordable housing, the politics of food, the support needed to maintain all kinds of diversity in a small Midwestern town.

Yellow Springs is fortunate to be home to nationally known individuals working in the field of environmental sustainability. It is also a community blessed with a large population of artists, including filmmakers, painters, poets, and artisans. So the Nonstop Institute incorporated the knowledge and skills of talented local experts, inviting them to invent workshops, give presentations, read or show recent work, and create community art projects. Our faculty, supplemented by Antioch College emeriti, offered a wide range of courses in familiar disciplines and areas (Beginning Chemistry, Research Methods in the Social Sciences, Anthropology of Place, Spanish, Modern Dance, Drawing, Existentialism, Film History, Advanced Computer Literacy, and so forth) as well as weekend workshops on such varied topics as Personal Finance, The Qur'an, and the History of Jazz.

In addition to these, we developed new interdisciplinary courses that we hoped would appeal to the interests of Yellow Springers of all ages; these included Community Economics and Environmental Sustainability, Visions of Suburbia, Queer Theory, and Environmental Philosophy. Abundant learning took place in countless ways outside the classroom as well, as students worked one-on-one with local artists to produce the “Nonstop Presents!” calendar, with a local filmmaker on research, and with Nonstop’s Community Government to forge policy.

One of Nonstop’s most successful new courses, Local and Sustainable Agriculture, proved an exemplary collaboration with environmental leaders and local organic farmers. The course consisted of a series of workshops that covered seed selection, soil preparation, permaculture practices, and strategies for raising and preserving affordable food. The workshops were located onsite at nearby farms and gardens, and students across generations contributed by volunteering manual work. (For more about this course, see Dispatch # 3 at the Nonstop web site.) Another example of applied learning aimed at meeting immediate needs was the Advanced Computer Literacy course, in which students and faculty worked together to produce the custom-built database that managed Nonstop’s registration and evaluation system.

Because classes were generally small (four to ten students), finding classroom spaces proved less of a problem than we had anticipated. Dance classes met in the Presbyterian Church hall, photography classes at the art center, Anthropology of Place at the home of a local supporter, and Visions of Suburbia in the living room of a Yellow Springs realtor. Faculty held office hours in coffee shops. Community meetings, events, and weekly lunches took place first in the Yellow Springs town hall and later in the industrial space we renovated to hold our business offices. All of Yellow Springs became the Nonstop Antioch campus, and one could potentially come across a Nonstop class or activity almost anywhere.

Another particularly effective Nonstop initiative was the cultural series we called “Nonstop Presents!” which we deliberately tied to the agendas of the town and to the major themes of the

curriculum. Each month we produced a calendar of eclectic events: film screenings, scholarly lectures, artists' talks, performances, panels on political issues. The series showcased the abundant talents of well-known Antioch College alumni from all over the country (most of whom donated their honoraria back to Nonstop), and we again drew upon regional resources—and upon our own students. “Nonstop Presents!” was also designed to enhance certain Nonstop courses and to provide opportunities for students to exhibit and discuss their in-class projects with a wider audience. Our intent was to give back to the Village through the creation of multiple public occasions for the sharing of art, ideas, and new thinking in community development. All in all, “Nonstop Presents!” hosted over 100 events and attracted more than 1,400 attendees.

In retrospect, it's hard to conceive of the specialized academics at a typical research university refusing to acknowledge their termination and uniting to continue their educational mission outside of the ivory tower. But the high value liberal arts colleges place on teaching, collegiality, and service had shaped the Antioch faculty's professional lives and identities. In addition, Antioch's small size required that its faculty become generalists, whether or not we started out that way, and therefore an unusually flexible group of academics open to new directions. We were also friends, colleagues, coconspirators; we had already been collaborating on committees organized to fight for the College and valued working together. Two-thirds of the faculty and staff who formed the backbone of the Nonstop experiment were female, a fact which may or may not be worthy of note; for good or for ill, women may still be more likely to relinquish personal ambitions in support of the greater whole.

A heavy contingent of Nonstop faculty came from the arts—partly the result of chance (a high concentration of faculty in the sciences were retirement age and opted to retire), and partly perhaps because practitioners in the arts are all too familiar with short-term projects and irregular incomes. The number of artists in our midst probably helped account for our overall willingness to take risks, to live with chronic uncertainty about the immediate future, and to

improvise constantly. When the residential space we had rented to house our registrar, student services, and business office proved unworkable, we immediately set about to find another. An Antioch alumnus who also happened to be a well-known professional set designer and sculptor directed the conversion of an old plastics factory into a new energy-efficient space we came to call Campus North. Dozens of us pitched in to spackle walls, install skylights, paint trim, wash floors, and decorate our new home.

Everything produced by Nonstop had a vibrant aesthetic quality. Fall semester was launched by a parade with a marching band. Colorful pennants designed by a local artist declared that a Nonstop class or “Nonstop Presents!” event was in session, wherever it happened to be taking place. Projects in dance, theater, photography, graphic design, and installation art expressed our vision of community while the process of artmaking, often done collectively, enacted it.

Because we had suffered the consequences of being excluded from career-altering decisions and subjected to top-down management, Nonstop was committed to bottom-up governance processes and a flat administrative organization. There was no president, no dean. Partly in response to entrenched problems of faculty pay inequity at the college, Nonstop took the unusual but important step of leveling pay scales so that all were paid roughly the same salary. We reconstituted Antioch’s bodies of community government but expanded them as well, regarding them as vital to the cultivation of critical leadership and civic skills in students as well as in faculty and staff. Organized into various committees, students, faculty, and staff regularly sat down together to discuss issues, to hammer out policies, and to make decisions about the direction of the project.

There were far too many dimensions of the Nonstop experiment to do adequate justice to them in this space (for more details, see our very informative multimedia Web site, nonstopinstitute.org). Nonstop’s innovative, all-open-source information technology system is just one facet that deserves its own article. But it is worth noting that the creative use of Internet

technology was integral to our ability to build and sustain a far-flung community as well as an immediate one. Our approach was to utilize the Internet to enable the all-important sharing of information and ideas and therefore to support collective decision-making. Listservs, a sophisticated online student newspaper, and the live Web streaming of meetings kept interested Antiochians constantly informed and engaged. With regard to teaching and course design, class Web sites were handy supplements to, but not substitutes for, face-to-face interaction. To explain ourselves to a wider public, we deployed multiple modes of outreach across the media spectrum; we sent email petitions, posted videos on Youtube and messages on Facebook, appeared on public access TV and local television, produced pamphlets and flyers, invited newspaper reporters to our classes, made presentations at conferences, and networked with academic labor movements across the country.

Rewarding as we found most of our work at Nonstop, the obstacles we faced were often daunting. The timeline of our existence was always unclear, as was our funding, which made advance planning and therefore accreditation impossible and severely hampered our efforts to recruit students. As we were not able to become an accredited academic institution, our potential pool of students was reduced, and ended up mostly a mix of former Antioch students, who were of course traditional college age, and interested villagers, many of whom were senior citizens with the time to take classes. This mix produced the challenge of integrating very different age groups and degrees of familiarity with higher education within the same classroom; at the same time, it created lively opportunities for learning across generational boundaries. The most unfortunate consequence of our unaccredited status turned out to be that traditional college-age, full-time students were not eligible for federal student loans. Forced to support themselves through paid work and/or parental contributions, many of the younger students struggled to balance work needed to pay rent alongside their commitment to Nonstop. Tuition, although drastically subsidized (we decided to charge \$100 a credit—or credit equivalent—hour; most classes were three credits) remained difficult to raise for some full-time

students.

Not surprisingly, the course of community governance “never did run smooth.” Consensus-building meetings often ran overtime, and students did not always feel their contributions were valued by the faculty. The intense debates that developed around the question of how much tuition students should pay, if any, led to considerable acrimony within the community. We all agreed that access to knowledge and education should ideally be available to all; opinions differed as to what was practical for Nonstop Antioch to attempt. Some students and faculty believed that the Nonstop ethos implied that there should be no tuition costs, or that an honor system should be set up in which students paid what they could afford. Others argued that an organization run on (quite limited) alumni donations needed to be accountable to its donors, and that it was reasonable to expect students to shoulder a portion of the costs of the enterprise. This group also argued that the giving away of college courses undermined the professionalism of an already-denigrated faculty. The former camp was of the opinion that free tuition would attract greater numbers of students; the latter feared that it would encourage the less committed. A compromise of sorts was hammered out: Arrangements were made through which tuition was worked off by in-kind service to the project. However, this resolution pleased almost no one and created the additional complication of supervising and quantifying this work and enforcing policies unpopular with students.

The debate around tuition continued through the entire first semester of Nonstop, morphing into a split essentially about the parameters of shared governance. This divide could loosely be characterized as a split between faculty and staff on one hand, arguing for actual or in-kind tuition and assuming the faculty’s right to determine this; and a group of traditional college-age students and a few faculty on the other, taking the position that Nonstop should aspire to be a free school with a truly communal—not faculty-dominated—system of governance. This argument exposed a deep fissure in the conception of Nonstop on the part of its community members, a fissure that only widened during the Institute’s short lifetime. Were we, first and

foremost, an educational institution, a political movement, or an experiment in community-building? Where were the boundaries of this community, and who did it now include? How should we weigh the “shares” in shared governance? Should shared governance at Nonstop mean that every community member, whatever his or her position, age, experience, or commitment level, participated in decision making—and if so, how much? Ultimately, although the executive collective and the faculty maintained control over the project, some Nonstoppers became disillusioned with what they perceived to be an inadequate vision of community.

Despite differences in vision, despite the instabilities which plagued the project, Nonstop Antioch’s accomplishments within the year of its existence were impressive: Our very public existence, our refusal to cede the College’s educational legacy or to accept its demise, exerted constant pressure on Antioch University to free the College. We were able to build an alternative institution of higher education in a few months’ time, an institution that enrolled a total of 124 multigenerational students, including a cohort of traditional-age students. We offered over thirty college-level courses and workshops each semester. Student evaluations of instruction collected the last week of both semesters yielded rave reviews of most of these courses and workshops. These evaluations (admittedly not necessarily indicators of academic and artistic caliber, but certainly useful information) presented glowing pictures of highly engaged students enthusiastic about their professors and the quality of teaching they had received. Unsurprisingly, given small class sizes, students described individual attention and ample guidance from faculty. More remarkable, given that momentum and motivation can be difficult to sustain in small classes, was the number of students reporting that they encountered serious, even life-changing, academic and artistic challenges. Almost across the board, students commended Nonstop classroom environments for stimulating open discussion and continuous experimentation.

During the dark period following the college’s closure, Nonstop preserved 21 decent-paying full-time jobs and created a number of part-time jobs in recession-stricken southwest Ohio. Our

total expenditures for Nonstop for the year came to \$1.4 million—however, this relatively small amount was supplemented by at least half a million dollars worth of in-kind contributions. Local supporters of many professions, from architects to lawyers to carpenters to artists to restaurateurs, donated time, professional services, materials, space, food, and so forth to the project. This amazing level of donations, as well as volunteer and discounted labor, generated excitement for our goals, which was in itself incredibly contagious. While relying on volunteerism and donations (and our own self-exploitation) was obviously a short-term survival strategy on our part, these exchanges strengthened the project in many respects, producing an energizing sense of interrelatedness and mutual striving.

Some measure of our success in deepening the partnership of Antioch College and the Village of Yellow Springs can be gauged by the many enthusiastic letters and editorials in the *Yellow Springs News*. Reporter Diane Chiddester described Nonstop as “the little educational engine that could.” In an editorial summarizing our first semester, she wrote:

Nonstop reminded us that the magic of learning has little to do with expensive buildings or high-tech equipment, and everything to do with dedicated teachers and passionate learners, engaged in exploration and critical inquiry... Most of all, Nonstop enriched the village by inspiring us with their example of audacity, perseverance, and the glory of winning a victory for humanity.

Higher education today is witnessing a clash of values—put most simply, between the conception of higher education as a public good, and the conviction (which takes varying forms, from wistful resignation to entrepreneurial zeal) that higher education must be abandoned to market forces and consumer trends, that educational institutions are best run like for-profit corporations. While its anomalous position under the university’s umbrella made our college particularly vulnerable to draconian measures, the impact of neoliberal attitudes on U.S. higher education across the board has been proving increasingly dire, most immediately for those who work and learn there. In response, Nonstop Antioch sought inspiration from the network-

organization models pioneered by bioregionalist and “slow food” movements. Instead of seeing itself as an isolated entity, Nonstop grounded itself in the existing resources and advantages of the Village of Yellow Springs and, at the same time, worked to make connections with other nearby colleges and other similar movements in progressive higher education around the country. These connections, and our constant influx of alumni, kept us from becoming insular and narrow, one of the possible downsides of localism. Yet perhaps the most important lesson of our endeavor turned out to be that surprisingly satisfying educational results can emerge when more attention is paid to the common interests of small colleges and the small towns they frequently inhabit. Un- or under-explored potentialities may well exist for collaborations and the sharing of facilities between small colleges and local civic and environmental organizations, artists’ collectives, churches, parks, and community centers. Another lesson is that expensive consultants offering conventional wisdom too often push to make colleges more generic than distinctive and focused on their own uniqueness, their own roots in the particularities of place.

While new partnerships will never be sufficient on their own to combat the many serious challenges currently facing American liberal arts colleges, there are practical as well as environmental reasons for turning to the local. Local economies are threatened by many of the same forces that are undermining small cultural institutions of all kinds, including small colleges—forces that push for continual expansion and needless development; forces that tend towards the imposition of economies of scale and their accompanying homogenization; forces that undermine community self-determination, citizen participation, fair labor practices, autonomy in the workplace, freedom of speech, and a reasonable quality of life for all. Nonstop’s temporary experiment in community-driven education is now over, but we hope that at least some of our creative synthesis of the liberal arts and the local will live on in a newly independent Antioch College.

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