



Preparing Teachers to Remake Societyⁱ: New College at Teachers College, Columbia University, 1932-1939

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The teachers college of the future...calls for radical modification of our present institutions for the training of teachers.

New College founders (1930, p. 1)

To those who have devoted their lives to the training of teachers, this educational experiment will come with something of a thrill.

Dean William F. Russell (1930, p. 23)

Introduction

New College was an experimental and demonstration undergraduate teacher education program, founded in 1932 at Teachers College Columbia University, only to be shut down by the administration eight years later. Described as an “unorthodox venture,” New College promised to be an alternative route to teacher education at a time when the nation was in the throws of economic and social devastation (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 222). This dramatic backdrop, “wedged between a past war and perhaps a coming war,” shaped how the program was executed and eventually became marginalized (New College Yearbook, 1939, p. 6).

This essay aims to illuminate New College’s founders, the philosophical framework behind the program, including its strong emphasis on community education,ⁱⁱ the mostly middle class students who enrolled in it, and finally its closing in the context of social, political, economic, and international events that held the attention of professional educators and others in the 1930s. Constructed with the help of primary and secondary sources (Cremin et al, 1954; Daughtery-Mix, 1968; Zeichner and Liston, 1991), this study also aims to characterize and analyze social, economic, and political realities that shaped higher education discourse about education at a time when progressivism dominated at Teachers College, and because of its influence, many programs nationwide (Tyack and Hansot, 1983). New College aimed to prepare empathetic and knowledgeable teacher-leaders, informed by a social reconstructionist critique of American capitalism, to work for social change in a community context. Though the program eventually could not garner the financial and ideological backing it needed to survive, it still provides a compelling example through which to contemplate complex and significant teacher education reform questions in the past and present.

New College was developed in the early 1930s within the context of professional debates about the nature of education. That is, scholars and practitioners debated the necessity or

inevitability of a connection between schooling and indoctrination. In 1934, at a meeting of the National Education Association, John Dewey suggested three roads education could take vis-à-vis indoctrination. “1) It can go on dwelling in the past; 2) it can set up ideal pictures for the future and strive to educate on the basis of that picture; 3) or we can strive through our schools to make pupils vividly and deeply aware of the kind of social world in which they are living” (p. 754). Dewey himself advocated for the last choice. He worried that the first was static and old, and that the second centered on an ideal that did not exist, and therefore could not adequately prepare students to analyze problems and make informed choices, a skill necessary for democracy. He believed the second choice was indoctrination in action. In many ways New College represented Dewey’s second and third choices simultaneously. For instance, the program presented ideal versions of education and society to students, and encouraged them to envisage and work toward such representations. Equally important to New College’s founders was the need for students to understand the social order as it existed, and so students were expected to probe real life examples.

Providing a helpful perspective from which to view New College, Zeichner and Liston (1991) suggest that one of the most notable characteristics of contemporary social reconstructionism in teacher education is its marginal status in relation to teacher education programs in the United States (p. 22). This study illuminates this claim through the example of a program that was marginalized soon after its inauguration. In many ways, New College represents a conflict over control of the teaching profession. Who decides what is the best way to prepare teachers? What is the role of the teacher in a school and in the larger society? Questions that were addressed by the New College model, such as—Who should teach? Should practical and academic training be integrated? What do teachers need to know to teach well? What is teaching for?—remain at the heart of teacher education. An alternative to the traditional programs at Teachers College, New College was itself a critique, an attempt to break the lock on teacher educators and the profession.

Social Reconstruction and Teacher Education

Those of us who are interested in making the educational profession function adequately in realizing a new American society equal to modern economic and cultural opportunities, must appreciate the necessity for breaking the present lockstep in teacher training.

George S. Counts (1935, p. 6-7)

New College grew out of the particular strand of progressivism described by George Counts in his groundbreaking speech to the Progressive Education Association in 1932. To the teachers, school administrators, education faculty, scholars, and activists to whom he spoke, Counts (1932) posed the now famous question: “Dare the School Build a New Social Order?” His speech was in effect a critique of his audience, suggesting that progressive education with its emphasis on child-centered practices had been interpreted narrowly and thus benefited only the children of the elite and middle class. According to Counts, progressive education had to reach beyond the transformation of the individual in order for societal transformation to be attained.

Alongside Counts’s call for social reconstructionism in education, he introduced his controversial views on “imposition and indoctrination”:



If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become less frightened than it is today at the bogies of *imposition* and *indoctrination* (Perlstein, 2000, p. 59).

Given the partiality of all educational activity and the domination of capitalistic and individualistic values, Counts argued, it was crucial that teachers foster values in support of a new social order. Counts (1932) found in indoctrination “a means to reconcile faith and reason, independence and civic solidarity, order and justice” (p. 9). While Counts’ call for indoctrination was acceptable among a group of radical progressive educators, not all progressives agreed with Counts and his supporters. For example, prominent professional educators such as Henry W. Holmes of Harvard University were strongly against schools promoting a pre-determined political program, favoring emphasis on students’ abilities to think critically about society. Zeichner and Liston (1991) note: “This tension between indoctrination and fostering critical intelligence has been characteristic of the reconstructionist tradition throughout its existence” (p. 27). School administrators, closer to classrooms than were scholars and professional educators, raised practical objections to indoctrination. “Those of us who have not taken leave of our senses,” wrote superintendent William Connor of Allentown, Pennsylvania, “know that the schools and schoolmasters are not generally going to be permitted to take the lead in changing the social order” (Krug, 1972, p. 239).

The Social Reconstructionists, including those who founded New College, took their central thrust from dissatisfaction with the economic and social system in the United States, and viewed curriculum and teaching as vehicles “by which social injustice would be redressed and the evils of capitalism corrected” (Kliebard, 1986, p. 183). Though collective ownership of the means of production was not a requirement for all educators who identified with social reconstructionism, most of them believed the economy must be regulated to support full employment and a fair standard of living for all. This view was shared by the New College founders and faculty and as such was reflected in the program’s promotional literature and curriculum. Counts (1932-33) himself was quoted in New College literature (New College Announcement) but even when he was not cited, the language used conjured up his brand of social reconstructionism. For example, the following appeared in the New College Bulletin during the winter of 1935:

New College students are urged to go beyond academic discussion to participation in social and political movements, each in accordance with his own convictions...They are to have a special concern for *reconstructing* educational institutions in light of the needs of a changing civilization (p. 2).

Making teacher education central to their social reconstructionist agenda, New College’s founders presented schools and adequately prepared teachers as “crucial elements in a movement toward a more just society” (Zeichner and Liston, 1991 p. 326).

Beginnings

Dr. Thomas Alexander’s personal strand of progressivism shaped New College, which was led by him from its inception until the summer of 1938 when Donald G. Tewksbury became director. Born in Germany and a graduate student at Columbia University (from where he

graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1910), Alexander eventually earned his doctorate from Teachers College Columbia University in 1918. He wrote about German progressivism on many occasions, including in *The Training of Elementary Teachers in Germany* (Alexander, 1929). According to Alexander (1929), progressive methods in education emphasized activity, social adjustment, and community rather than passive accumulation of information. In his conception, the teacher's attitude toward students had to incorporate greater warmth and informality. Moreover, the school had to be flexible in providing for individual difference and student interest (pp. 242-244). Alexander was sometimes nationalistic about German progressivism, believing that important tenets of the American version were bred on German soil. But his writings and his ideas for New College were similarly informed by American progressive education.

Alexander (1936) urged others to take an “active part in political movements” but did not seem to participate in activism beyond his role as a teacher educator (p. 450). He was never a part of the Kilpatrick study group known as the “Social Frontier,” and associated with the journal of the same name. Though Alexander was not an activist personally he appears to have accepted Counts' proposal for the reconstruction of society through educational activism. For example, New College's first published catalogue quoted Counts' argument that broad plans of social change must be translated into “changes, habits, and ideas in order to gain prominence” (New College Announcement, 1932-33, p. 4).

While Counts (1932) and other social reconstructionists influenced the philosophy behind New College, with its aim to prepare teachers to “enact social welfare through education” (p. 14), pedagogically Alexander was more influenced by Kilpatrick's views on how the psychological order and experience structure learning. In *The Educational Frontier*, Kilpatrick and his colleagues (1969) argued the school must have contact with daily life, integrate its activities into the community so to maintain and further the community, that a particular society (not an abstraction) be emphasized, and that scientific method be applied to everyday thinking (pp. 19, 33-36, 56 & 272-73). All of these themes were central to New College's program.

John Dewey's work was equally instructive to Alexander and his colleagues. Dewey's writings that were accessible and relevant to method had the greatest appeal—works such as “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), *The School and Society* (1899), and *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915)—were read and discussed in New College seminars. Students took away from their studies at New College knowledge of Dewey's theory of experience and education, expressed by a former student as “learning by living” (Larson, 2001, p. 6). However, Dewey's philosophical works were nearly ignored resulting in a neglect of Dewey's emphasis on the value of abstraction and intellect (Daughterty-Mix, 1968, p. 49). This omission most certainly paved the way for criticism of the program as anti-intellectual and otherwise less than adequate.

Educating Teachers at Teachers College Columbia University

While New College directed its attention to the preparation of teachers, the major purpose of Teachers College in the 1920s and 1930s was the development of experienced teachers and the preparation of administrators and supervisors (Teachers College Bulletin, 1932-33, p. 2). The regular Teachers College Master of Arts presented an influential model for teacher education defined largely by James Earl Russell (1894-1927) and his colleagues, that included four main components: 1) general culture (study of the relationship among the various fields of knowledge), 2) special scholarship (inquiry around teaching), 3) professional knowledge (theory



and practice of American education), and 4) technical skill (practices to be honed in a “model school” (Cremin, 1978, pp. 10-11).

In the year preceding New College’s opening, Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees in Elementary Education, Secondary Education, and Rural Education (for Supervisors and Directors), were available to students who completed “one academic year of about forty hours a week in class attendance, preparation, study or laboratory” (Teachers College Bulletin, 1931-32, p. 7). Candidates had to earn at least thirty points over a period of no less than one academic year. Students were required to take eighteen credits of graduate courses at Teachers College but could earn credits beyond this in other Columbia University departments. Students took courses in their major as well as courses in education history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics and comparative education. In addition to coursework, a report on field or laboratory investigation demonstrating the ability of the student “to select, organize, and present the results of professional investigation in the field” was required for a Master’s degree (Teachers College Bulletin, 1935, p. 5). Fieldwork was also required but in many cases student teaching was not necessary because the typical student had already taught in a school.

Though situated at Teachers College, New College was in the words of its leadership an “autonomous body” and so was “unhampered in the development of its own particular program” (Linton, 1936, p. 305). Freedom from the more traditional tracks offered at Teachers College were selling points that distinguished the program and eventually contributed to its weakened position at the college.

Curriculum and Practice

The curriculum of the school, and the curriculum of New College, must be coextensive with life itself.

Clarence Linton (1936, p. 305)

In order to reconstruct education and the social order, the New College founders believed that a fresh and radical approach to teacher education was necessary. The curriculum included a wide range of experiences that were designed to support the education of the individual, citizen, and professional worker (Alexander, 1936, p. 448). Activities of particular importance in developing students were courses and seminars, dormitory life, participation in the New College Community in North Carolina, fieldwork in Harlem, travel and foreign study abroad, a period in industry, a year of student teaching and other internships, group projects, and participation in political organizations (Alexander, 1936, p. 457).

The curriculum was organized around “universal problems” with all areas of study to be integrated with actual life situations, including: 1) adjustment to and cooperation with others, 2) creation, interpretation and appreciation of art and beauty; 3) raising the standard of living, and 4) acquisition and transmission of the social heritage (Alexander, 1936, p. 449). New College students were to gain a broad understanding of these problems moving from how they apply to the individual, the society, and finally how they apply to teaching children, changing schools, and the function of education within the social order. There were four divisions that gave shape to the curriculum which were also designed to help students address “universal problems” vis-a-vis real life concerns (Linton, 1936, p. 4). The divisions were human relations (social sciences,

geography, home economics, child development and family life, psychology), natural sciences and mathematics, the arts (graphic, plastic, and industrial arts, music English languages and literature, classical languages and literature, modern foreign languages), and philosophy (including religion) (Linton, 1936, p. 4).

In the first two years students took the Central Seminar, which was both an orientation and a forum for the raising of problems broadly conceived. The program increasingly focused on professional concerns in the third year. Along with seminars, students took courses in human relations, natural sciences and mathematics, the arts, or philosophy. In addition to coursework, students participated in independent study, directed reading, considerable faculty-student counseling, and fieldwork referred to as “service.” Alexander along with New College faculty members Agnes Snyder and Florence Stratemeyer (1937) wrote about the seminars:

...The seminars serve as the centralizing agencies through which [students’] expanding knowledge and understanding are unified and shaped into a point of view and a line of action. The movement is from consideration of personal problems to social problems, and to the educational problem. Thus the attempt is made to aid the students in his development as a person, a citizen, and a teacher (p. 177).

Because there was a commitment to individualizing the program through one-on-one guidance, there were no time limits for fulfilling course and field requirements. The program was in session almost year round including summers spent either abroad, at the farm, or in industry. Students were expected to graduate in five years, which would earn them a combined Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degree. This included the writing of a thesis based on an internship problem and practice teaching. Student teaching lasted one year in either a progressive public or private school and arrangements could be made to provide student teachers with a “moderate salary” (Teachers College Bulletin, 1930-1931, p. 13).

Community Education as “Contact with Life”

The teacher if he is to be “inspired by social vision” needs...to be sensitive to the underlying world currents, which directly or indirectly affect the destinies of communities and individuals.

Agnes Snyder (1935-36, pp. 1-2)

The New College curriculum aimed to provide “contact with life” and “understanding of the people” through firsthand experience in various communities (Russell, 1931, p. 22). Faculty member Agnes Snyder (1939) captured the ethos of community education at New College when she wrote, “Only as people learn to work together on concrete problems within their grasp can they be expected to come into a realization of the need for fundamental social change” (p. 308). She continued,

The student preparing to teach will, through working with concrete problems of community living, gain that necessary basic experience which will lessen the chance that he will launch on some half understood theoretical program of social change (p. 309).

As part of community education at New College, students lived at least a summer at the New College Community, a student-operated farm on a large estate in North Carolina. Faculty member Clarence Linton (1936) described the farm experience as “a laboratory for the study of



science, for the study of rural life, and for experience in human relationships” (p. 4). One of the activities at the farm was running schools for “the mountain children,” which took place during the summer and grew out of “neighborly intercourse” between New College students and the permanent residents (Bain, 1938, p. 245). Farm work included hoeing fields and gardens, killing and dressing chickens, and cooking meals for the farm members. Study of the farm’s surroundings and community problems led to projects such as installing a twenty-four foot in diameter water wheel for the generation of electricity, all done by students and under the supervision of a physics instructor (Alexander, 1933, p. 2). They also created a library at the local public school with books donated from Teachers College. Faculty member Winifred E. Bain (1938) described the farm experience as extending “beyond the hoe and the dishpan” with the students engaged in “earnest investigations of their own problems, and those of their mountain neighbors” (pp. 245-246). Former New College student, Mildred Larson, spoke in 2001 at age eighty-two about the farm as an integrated learning experience:

What we did was we extracted or extrapolated all the things we did on the farm and the curriculum that was formed or constructed around the work that we did, we had our natural sciences, we had our home economics, we had our social studies...We lived in a community of mountain people. And they were a wonderful source of information (p. 9).

The farm was just one of many opportunities for community education at New College. A period working in industry was to “develop in [students] an effective appreciation and understanding of... the attitudes and psychology of the industrial worker, and of the problems of the present social and economic order” (Alexander, 1936, p. 451). Larson’s husband also attended New College. While in the program, he worked in a factory as a fabric designer and was expected to design, market and sell what he made. Larson (2001) described the main elements of the period in industry, “You would earn money and experience the struggle that existed at the time...By learning, by doing, you understood what people in the outer world were struggling for” (p. 20-21).

The neighborhood surrounding Teachers College served as another site for community education at New College, which in this context was fashioned to support future teachers to participate in “urban community development” (Alexander, 1933, p. 9). Harlem was located just adjacent to Columbia’s Morningside Heights and provided an ideal location for student learning and activism. Alexander (1933) wrote about the neighborhood’s inherent value in preparing future educators: “The immediate environment of the University furnishes striking contrasts of economic privilege and social status. ...Many students who have spent their whole lives in New York City need to have their eyes opened to the seamy side of life, which exists around them” (p. 9).

New College students were required to visit Harlem schools in order to have contact with children of diverse racial and economic backgrounds and to observe “problems of the relation of the school to society” (Snyder, 1939, p. 303). Beginning in 1935, a student-run neighborhood program called Hilltop included a nursery school, a Kindergarten for four year olds, an afternoon program offering classes and recreational activities, and evening classes for neighborhood adults taught by Teachers College and New College students, jointly funded by New College and private monies. Just the afternoon program at Hilltop provided fifty internship placements for

New College students who taught among other things Art, making of model airplanes, cooking, dancing, drama, piano, sewing and singing to almost three hundred children (Snyder, 1936, p. 2). Beyond Hilltop, a number of New College students worked in settlements and other social agencies in the neighborhood.

Travel in the United States and abroad was another component of community education at New College. Most typically, students went to Germany or England and remained there for eight months. A portion of the time spent was in residence at a university with another portion spent living with a host family. Before departing, New College students identified problems for focused study while they were overseas. Gathering materials on “the chosen problem” and preparing an extensive report took up a big portion of the students’ time abroad (Alexander, 1933, p. 8). Participants were encouraged not to travel to other countries as they were expected to gain “insight into the civilization of one nation” (Alexander, 1933, p. 8).

Study and travel abroad was to also supply New College students with critical insight into the social, political, and economic challenges back home. Alexander described what students learned by participating in the overseas program,

Not only does one learn how to interpret intelligently the distinctive aspirations and institutions of another civilization, but he is likely to return with a far deeper insight into the virtues and limitations of his own country. If a student happens to have lived in a country like Germany which has gone through a revolution, he can never be a mere spectator when a struggle among conflicting social philosophies is underway in his own country (Alexander, 1933, p. 8).

Preparing students to be active in various struggles, with a critical perspective on governments in the U.S. and abroad, the study abroad experience was a central component of community education at New College

“Superior Young Men and Women”

New College attracted students who were drawn to its innovation and progressive curriculum, including the requirement “to actively take charge” of their own education (Teachers College Bulletin, 1935, p. 5). High tuition meant New College students were generally from at least the middle class, with many from across the country and even overseas (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 225). Among the students who enrolled in New College were Sinclair Lewis’ niece, Isabel Lewis of Missouri, and the Iraqi Prince, Nuhammad Nsir (New College Outlook, 1934, p. 4). But New College students were overwhelmingly Jewish and from New York City. In 1937, thirty-eight percent of the total student body and fifty percent of the New York City students at New College were Jewish, and the administration periodically conferred about how numbers could be brought down to a “more normal representation” (Letter to Thomas Alexander from Clarence Linton, January 15, 1935).

New College sought high caliber young men and women who would graduate and become “intellectually, physically, emotionally and socially” superior teachers (Linton, 1936, p. 1). Faculty member Clarence Linton (1936) described New College’s interest in locating the “best” students possible, which meant “individuals with high intellectual endowment, high scholastic attainment, high social and economic status, superior personal qualities, good health and good character (p. 2). The emphasis on getting excellent candidates meant that the application process was extensive.



Historian Kate Rousmaniere (1997) in her study of New York City teachers in the 1920s considered entrance requirements to teaching. She wrote, “the prerequisite of secondary and higher education for teachers meant that only the elite few who could afford an education were qualified to be teachers. Teaching was thus a method of upward mobility for those who were already upwardly mobile” (pp. 52-53). Rousmaniere (1997) suggests that popular images of the professional teacher further narrowed the applicant pool to those candidates who fit the social ideal and who were able and willing to take on a job that was billed as both a profession and a volunteeristic mission (p. 53). The candidates who entered New College in the 1930s may not have been very different from the New York City teachers described by Rousmaniere, except many of them were even more elite. Like Rousmaniere’s teachers of the 1920s, New College candidates saw teaching as “entering a profession” as well as having “a volunteeristic mission.”

Students and Activism

To substitute vigorous activity for academic neutrality in public affairs, New College students are urged to go beyond discussion and to participate in social and political movements.

B. Lamar Johnson (1937, p. 165)

New College students were generally a dedicated and liberal group and in some cases had leanings toward socialism and radicalism. For example, students hoping to participate in the “creation of a new social order” based on “production for use rather than for profit” launched a New College chapter of the Student League for Industrial Democracy in the fall of 1934, a national group that had John Dewey and Norman Thomas as members (New College Outlook, December 7, 1934, p. 1). The Sociology Club with professor William Taylor as its president hosted politically charged speakers and discussions on topics such as the class struggle in America (New College Outlook, December 7, 1934, p. 2). The title of one of the student newspapers, the *New College Interrogator*, provides further evidence that there was a student commitment to activist causes.

Alexander and his colleagues fashioned a program that would propel social change through teachers’ activist work. In 1933, he promised not to graduate students who were “politically illiterate or indifferent” and described the New College program as field-based political education (p. 10). To this end, students were encouraged by program faculty to participate in social and political movements. In the fall of 1937, Alexander announced two scholarships for students “who go farthest beyond academic neutrality” in participation in life outside the university (Report on New College, 1937, p. 19). On occasion, New College student activism was “a double-edged sword” for the program’s leadership. This was true when students threatened to participate in activism instead of sailing to Europe for study abroad. A college report described the incident:

This spring, when the students going to Europe were scheduled to sail, it was a bit troublesome to have some of them declare that they were in sympathy with the outlaw seamen’s strike that had been declared and that, therefore, it was against their conscience to sail on the boat selected, and that, furthermore, New College should show its stand by canceling the passages taken. It requires time to teach the art of “knowing when” (Linton 1937, p. 4).

But in reality, only a small minority of students and faculty participated in political activity. The New College student newspapers periodically castigated students for their apathy toward political events at the college, at Columbia University, and on the national and international scene (*New College Outlook*, December 6, 1937). Among New College faculty members, Paul Limbert (1934) probably most encouraged students to get involved in social causes, while others did limited political work; though faculty member Goodwin Watson was president of the University chapter of the Teachers Union (pp. 118-224).

Causes for Concern

Fashioned by its ambitious goals, New College had many atypical features that contributed to student and faculty skepticism, and for some, burnout. A system of exams measuring student achievement required a great deal of individual consultation and guidance. Though Cremin et al (1954) suggested: “Since the student body was small – capped at 360 students – such attention was possible,” (p. 222) one might question this assumption given the complexity of the program and assessment system. Even though there were less than 300 students enrolled at one time, such attention must have been a challenge to provide.

The program seemed to have instilled “many kinds of insecurity” in its participants (Watson, 1964, p. 103). For example, there was uncertainty around the time frame necessary to get a degree as well as concern about the high tuition fees. Evidence of the toll these factors had on New College students can be seen in enrollment data. The program accepted 149 applicants in its first year and by 1934-35 there were 355 enrolled students. However, by the start of the 1937 academic year, over 60 percent of students who had been enrolled had dropped out (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 223). There is evidence that some students became disillusioned with aspects of the program’s requirements claiming, for example, that “doing crowded out learning” at the farm community (Daugherty-Mix, 1968, pp. 224-225).

New College faculty were idealistic and creative and shared a desire for freedom, possibilities for experimentation, and a willingness to work long hours for low pay for “the sake of their ideals” (Watson, 1964, p. 102). However, salaries were often insufficient with seven of the 23 full-time staff members in 1937-1938 receiving \$2,000 or less, well below faculty salaries at Teachers College and Columbia University at the time (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 225). In 1937-38, the New College faculty, one third holding doctorates, consisted of 39 full and part-time members, most with yearly appointments. There is evidence that they were prolific writers, publishing numerous books, articles, and pamphlets in the first five years of the program (Cremin et al, 1954, pp. 224-225). On top of their scholarly work, most faculty members spent fifteen hours a week in the classroom and put in significant time for faculty-student conferences and staff meetings, some scheduled on Saturdays (New College Meeting Minutes, September 7-13, 1933). Student assessment was extensive and time-consuming, based on “growth,” “behavior patterns,” and “the degree to which the student [had] come into understanding of the meanings and implications of his own conduct and that of others” (Linton, 1937, pp. 4-5). Qualitative judgments of student growth were more difficult to make “than to assign a grade of ‘A’ or ‘B,’” but program faculty believed such approaches were necessary because each student was unique, working at different rates and in different ways (New College Plan of Examinations, October 8, 1937).



Given the heavy workload it is no surprise that New College faculty felt pushed to their limit. The economist William Withers left the program over his concerns that faculty were asked to “work out too many ideas at once,” were underpaid, and had no time to keep up with their fields. Withers (1937) became a strong critic of New College suggesting that progressive educators had done “too much acting and not enough thinking” (p. 402). Concerns about the program’s anti-intellectualism were at the heart of these charges.

Lack of academic rigor was a cause of concern for students as well. Although students admired faculty members for their intellectual rigor in the classroom, students criticized some faculty members. During an interview conducted in 1968 by Daugherty-Mix (1968) for her dissertation on New College, many students had “regarded the general level of course work as low, and the greatest opportunity for getting a good academic education was through coursework taken at Columbia University.” One graduate suggested students were allowed to “get away with a lot of talk” and that small groups would control discussion in seminars. Another graduate suggested subject learning was not possible at the farm because students were too busy with chores (pp. 308-309).

Because of concerns about the program’s execution, early on committed faculty made efforts to improve New College. In 1936, a faculty report identified areas requiring attention including admissions techniques and the evaluation of student achievement (“The Next Four Years,” p. 1). The report suggested more information about applicants was needed, including psychological and oral examination results. In a section called “Improving Instruction,” the authors argued for,

[More] emphasis on the student’s part in working out his own problems. There is still too much ‘spoon-fed’ classroom instruction in New College. There needs to be much more growth in the direction of using the instructor as one would use a book, namely, as a source of experience and wisdom... (p. 2).

Though there is evidence of efforts to improve New College, enrollment decline became an area of concern just three years after it’s founding.

Termination of the Program

As previously stated, more than sixty percent of all New College students left the program before graduating. Reasons for student withdrawal included financial problems brought on by the Depression, the high ratio of female students who married, and disillusionment with the curriculum including the extensive field requirements. Also, attempts to transform students into activist-teachers and leaders were not warmly received by all. As a result, financial problems arose quickly and with major consequence.

New College was over budget each year after its first year by as much as \$57,000. Because the program was continuously in financial straits, closing it was considered as early as 1937 (Cremin et al, 1954, pp. 226-227). During 1936 and 1937, proposals were made to strengthen New College including that it be modified to correspond to state standards, but the proposals were opposed by program faculty and administration. In a desperate move to save the experiment, Alexander included a proposal that withdrew his own salary from the financial plan (Memo from Alexander, October 13, 1937). However, in early November 1938, during a special assembly of students and faculty, perhaps no longer willing to sponsor activities over which he

did not have direct control, Dean William F. Russell (Dean from 1927-1948) announced that New College would close the following summer. It has been suggested that because of the friendship between Alexander and Russell, Russell “carefully removed Alexander” a year before he announced his decision to terminate New College (Watson, 1964, p. 106). To many, the news was crushing. Cremin et al (1954) wrote: “The announcement of closing was taken as a declaration of war. After Russell read his brief statement at the meeting, a faculty member rose to make a speech of strong protest” (p. 227). Betrayed and angry, students and faculty met regularly after the announcement and mobilized to oppose the decision.

Critics argued the closing of New College was a political response to the left-wing activities of its faculty and students. The *Nation* suggested that Teachers College would benefit from its termination by the receipt of more gifts from conservative and business donators (See Wechsler, December 17, 1938). Left-leaning organizations including the League of American Writers, Local 537 of the New York College Teachers Union, the Communist Party of Columbia University and the Socialist Party all wrote protest statements (Daughterty-Mix, 1968, p. 333). Marxist Leo Huberman (1938), who had joined the New College faculty in its last year wrote, “A College is Fired,” for a publication of the American Federation of Teachers. Regardless of the support, in late November the Teachers College faculty voted 55 to 29 to close New College. After an investigation by the Teachers College Faculty Advisory Committee, it was concluded that the administration “acted honestly, and with the best intent to serve the interests of Teachers College as a whole” (Faculty Advisory Committee Report, 1939, pp. 448-449).

The Committee reported they could not determine the administration had expressed any criticism of “any radical theories held by the professors or students of New College” (Faculty Advisory Committee Report, 1939, pp. 448-449). However, supporters were convinced that radicalism led to New College’s demise. Undoubtedly, its status as a “cultural island” cut New College off from the intellectual, financial and administrative resources that it desperately needed to survive (Watson, 1964, p. 106). It has been suggested that Dean Russell believed that after the closing, angry New College students were “misled by Communist agitators not really interested in New College but bent on the overthrow of our democracy” (Watson, 1964, p. 112).

In 1939, a group of students published the final New College Yearbook in which they proclaimed, “New College is being closed. This book is a statement of the philosophy it has helped us build.” Alongside grainy black and white photos depicting the farm community, work in industry, work in schools, and study abroad, the students expressed their loyalty to the program and its underlying aims as they related to social reconstruction:

We recognize education itself as meaningful only in relation to the economic and social conditions of its time...We are preparing not only to be teachers in the narrow sense, but to be active participants in the community in which we will work and assume educational leadership (p. 6).

“The Power of Social Critique in Education”

The teacher must...have a fresh vision of the world or landscapes and cities and social institutions. This is the world that, ultimately, must inform every aspect of his teaching: and this is the world that his teaching will help to form anew, to re-form, to transform.

Lewis Mumford (1939, p. 496)



The same year New College was terminated, Lewis Mumford wrote about the social responsibilities of teachers, echoing views held by supporters of New College. Mumford's call for a political role for the teacher was made at the twilight of a diminishing progressive movement in professional education, brought on by the outset of World War II and subsequent changes in American social, economic and political life. Historian Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (2000) suggested that the "demise" of the "Social Frontier" as well as the waning of other progressive efforts, such as the discontinuance in 1940 of the radical social studies textbooks written by Harold Rugg, came as the United States entered World War II, leaving behind the economic suffering and intellectual radicalism of the 1930s. She wrote: "The nation's movement away from the social and intellectual ferment of the Great Depression years toward a war-related rise in patriotism yet again changed the social context for curriculum making" (p. 129). Lagemann's analysis pushes one to view New College in the context of a movement away from progressive efforts that rose out of the economic despair and subsequent radicalism of the 1930s, and within the wider history of progressivism in education.

A closer look at what was happening at the faculty and administrative levels at Teachers College during this period makes evident a gradual shift away from experimentalism and social reconstructionism for both ideological and financial reasons. In the early 1930s, Dean Russell appeared to be supportive of those associated with social reconstructionism and their efforts to transform teacher education, including New College. For example, when New College was first announced in 1931, Russell (1931) characterized its founders as having very good intentions, writing that they "would build the best system of teacher training that they know" (p. 23). Also, during this period, he supported ED 200F, the new two-semester course developed to provide Teachers College students with a critical perspective on schools and society through the study of the social context of education. By the late 1930s, however, Russell had lost confidence in teacher education efforts informed by social reconstructionism, including the New College program. In his 1937 Dean's Report, Russell claimed that the Social Reconstructionists had failed to make professional education specific, rigorous, and free from politics, and that they neglected to explain how theory would inform practice on the ground (p. 9). Moreover, he suggested that their efforts veered toward indoctrination and thus could not advance democratic dialogue, which he believed was essential to both education and democracy (See Barnard, *The New York Times*, February 24, 1937).

Although acknowledging the various disagreements that existed between Dean Russell and the Social Reconstructionists, the historiography tends to characterize the faculty and administration of Teachers College as having similar perspectives on the role and function of American education including schools in reform (See Cremin et al, 1954, p. 148). However, the existence of some shared commitments did not mean there was a shared allegiance to social reconstructionism across Teachers College in the 1930s (McCarthy and Murrow, in progress). In fact, there was conflict, and sometimes, deep discord across groups (See *The New York Times*, February 25 1937; McCarthy and Murrow, in progress). Most Division of Curriculum and Instruction faculty did not participate in New College. The separation between the Division of Curriculum and Instruction and those associated with social reconstructionism was defined by distinctively different foci on developing the child vs. reforming society (Peffer, 1934). While administrative progressives like Edward Thorndike critiqued child-centered, progressive practices, the reconstructionists' emphasis on educating for collectivism, an idea espoused by

many New College faculty, was in opposition to the ideas of William Bagley, Jr. and others who believed that true learning was best measured by standardized tests. At Teachers College, opposing viewpoints on educational reform had surrounded New College from the start. As time went on, Dean Russell and other administration officials lost interest in supporting the program in the context of its growing debt and a mounting intolerance for social reconstructionism in general.

Scholars argue the progressives including the Social Reconstructionists, had little impact on classrooms and schools and failed miserably to lead a new social order in the 1930s, or in any subsequent decade (See Cremin, 1964, p. 233; Moreo, 1996, pp. 30-31). Historian Daniel Perlstein (2001) suggests that if we judge Counts by a more modest standard then his efforts seem more impressive. For example, though educators either embraced or rejected indoctrination, Count's critique did succeed in placing study of the social problems of the day in the curriculum, what Perlstein calls "the power of social critique in education" (pp. 64-65). With New College and the work of the Social Frontier educators as a part of this legacy, the suggestion that social reconstructionism had little influence on mainstream U.S. teacher education is at least an overstatement.ⁱⁱⁱ Evidence of curricular social reconstructionism can be found in the foundations course ED 200F, which was required for all Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy students at Teachers College from 1933 until 1954 (See McCarthy, 2006). This interdisciplinary, two-term, team-taught foundations course reflected the content and values of New College, such as the critical study of the social context as a way to understand educational problems. As a result, spanning the years 1932 to 1954 the majority of enrolled Teachers College students were at least exposed to social reconstructionism, either at New College, while taking ED 200F, or through the numerous faculty members whose teaching of other courses was informed by this perspective. Because of Teachers College's significant role in training teachers, school leaders, and scholars in education during this period, social reconstructionism most likely influenced graduates of Teachers College as well as the programs in which they later carried out their careers (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 269).

Conclusion: Implications for the Present

The significance for a contemporary study of teacher preparation at New College lies in the position of social advocacy embedded in its curriculum and practice. As in the 1930s and education reform in the 2000s, social, political, economic, and international challenges shape teacher education reforms. Both periods produced attempts to solve educational problems through scientific means. Both periods also produced an opposition claiming that scientific approaches do not support education's full capacity in a democracy.

For example, during the Progressive Era, professional educators such as David Snedden and John Franklin Bobbitt sought to efficiently train school children for their future roles in society (Kliebard, 1987, p. 78). Specifically, their "social efficiency" reform proposals, which encompassed curriculum making and practices like tracking, were to prepare students, "according to his capabilities" (Bobbitt, 1912, p. 269), for the social, political and economic status quo. Serving as a counterpoint to this discourse, Alexander and his New College colleagues believed that teaching and schooling must advance democratic collectivism, not individualism or capitalism. In their view, schools were well situated to promote "the common good," which to them meant economic and social equality and justice for all.



In the present, powerful stakeholders in education argue for “accountability” in all aspects of education. In their view, accountability can be enforced through the existence of State standards, frequent testing, “research-based” practices, and the linking of teacher competence with student outcomes. The aim of such efforts is to guarantee individual academic gain for hard working students so they can become active and constructive participants in the workforce after graduation. Barbara Bales (2006) suggests that since the 1980s policy changes have “sidelined” teacher education professionals and shifted program accountability from the state to national level. (p. 1). Today, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and similar efforts to quantify and classify student gains through test scores increasingly influences teacher preparation. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan, appointed by President Barack Obama in 2009, calls for teacher regulation and assessment through student testing data. In response to recent policies and mandates, Bill Ayers (2009) has suggested that more and more national and state sanctioned educational goals aim to “sort people into winners and losers” even though the dialogue dominating public education is centered on the promise to not leave any child behind. The dominant view supporting teacher preparation reform today links teachers’ purposes with their capacity to ensure student academic gain through test scores. Such a link is not problematic in and of itself. What is problematic is the increasingly narrow view of teachers’ capacities as they come into contact with youth in schools.

Bringing to bear the example of New College on teacher education in the present can aid in the posing of epistemological questions that challenge current practices. Such questions may include: What do “good” teachers know and do? What should be taught in school and to what ends? And, what are teachers for beyond their capacity to make high scoring students? Studying New College and its founders demonstrates that education reformers in an earlier period were critical of the existing social, political, and economic order and that the education reforms they proposed were aimed at changing it. Moreover, studying about New College brings to the fore its broadly conceived role for teachers, which included being a “worker” for social reform. Instead of preparing teachers to “sort students into winners and losers,” the program’s founders sought to change the social order through teachers’ work in communities. New College graduates were required to demonstrate they were “superior teachers” before a degree was conferred (Linton, April 26, 1935). For New College faculty, superior teaching was not defined solely by the academic gain of students taught, but by the degree to which teachers’ beliefs and practices were aligned with social reconstructionism.

Notes

1. Alexander, T. (1933). Significance of New College, 4. This quote is taken from Thomas Alexander’s 1933 memo on New College. He described an essential characteristic of the program as, “There will be experiences that will help the prospective teacher to grow in an appreciation of *the place of the teacher in the remaking of society.*”
2. “Community education” refers to curriculum and experiences that support students to encounter and navigate concrete problems of community living so as to gain insight into a community’s position in the larger social, political, and economic scene and its potential for improvement.
3. For examples of social reconstructionism informing teacher education since New College see Grinberg, J. (2002). “I had never been exposed to teaching like that”: Progressive teacher education at Bank Street during the 1930s, *Teachers College Record* 104: 1422-1460; See also Rogers, C. on the Putney Graduate Schools of Education (2006); Programs were instituted at Adelphi University (1948) and Fairleigh Dickinson (1964) with the help of former New

College faculty that carried on the New College philosophy. See also Daughterty-Mix (1968). *New College at Teachers College: A history, 1932-1939*, pp. 377-380.

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