Diamond in the Rough: A Century of Education and Democracy at Deep Springs College

L. Jackson Newell
University of Utah, Jack.Newell@utah.edu

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Lucie L. Nunn to the first students at Deep Springs College:

"For what came ye into the wilderness?" Not for conventional scholastic training; not for ranch life; not to become proficient in commercial or professional pursuits for personal gain. You came to prepare for a life of service.... Those who listen will hear the purpose, philosophy, and ethics of Deep Springs.¹

In the evening shadow of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest of California's White Mountain Range, Deep Spring College has been on the edge for over a century. It is on the edge of Death Valley, on the edge of two wilderness areas, on the edge of civilization, and on the edge of innovation among America's colleges and universities. It has also been on the edge of oblivion more than once.

Like the bristlecone pines, Deep Springs thrives today despite recurring existential threats, thanks to its unique empowerment of students coupled with high expectations for their performance. These students are challenged to solve problems in ranch work and community labor, excel in a demanding arts and sciences curriculum, govern their own affairs, and participate fully in directing the college itself. These duties and privileges are accompanied with a lifelong expectation to serve the greater good. CBS’s “60 Minutes” recently featured Deep Springs as a college that works in an era of calamities in higher education.²

An Unlikely Saga

Pioneering hydroelectric entrepreneur Lucien L. Nunn (1853-1925) began and concluded his career as a philosopher. His far-reaching ideas about technology, education, and democracy
were magnified by his late-in-life discovery of John Dewey and his pragmatic philosophy of learning. The resulting synergy has guided Deep Springs College for over a century. Nunn's vision for preparing societal leaders emerged gradually as he faced a succession of practical problems on the frontiers of electrical technology, business management, and American democracy. The creation and unlikely survival of Deep Springs College have thrust Nunn’s thought and life force into the present.

The story of Deep Springs College is even more intriguing because it has often been its students, rather than its faculty, trustees, or presidents, who have risen to defend Nunn’s progressive ethical principles and Deweyan educational methods. Not only does Deep Springs survive and flourish after a turbulent first century, but it has adapted to a changing society and spawned a flock of new progressive colleges.

The Founder

L.L. Nunn personified the imagination, resolve, conscience, and, indeed, paradoxes of the Progressive Era in American history. Starting with little more than a quick and curious mind, and more restless energy than his compact 5’1” body could contain, he wandered the Northeast and Europe in search of truth and a mission in life, attending lectures at several universities but never matriculating due to self-doubts and self-consciousness that stemmed from a minor eye injury in childhood. In his mid-twenties, he migrated to the Colorado frontier to test his mettle against the raw land and rough culture of that time and place. He struggled with repeated failures and disappointments in Leadville and Durango en route to surprising successes in Telluride as a mine manager, mine owner, banker, and newspaper owner. Like his robber baron contemporaries, Nunn was a ferocious competitor. But he was a man of universal interests with competing humane and ruthless instincts.
With labor unrest and energy shortages bearing down on Telluride’s mining economy and no apparent path forward, Nunn traveled to Pittsburgh in the winter of 1890 to forge a partnership with George Westinghouse. Using Nikola Tesla’s theory of alternating electrical current, they built the world’s first successful commercial-scale hydroelectric power plant at Telluride, Colorado. It revolutionized power generation and launched Nunn into a new career.

Nunn’s hydroelectric enterprises spread throughout the West, reaching into Mexico and Canada, and eventually encompassing the installation (between 1903 and 1906) of the landmark Ontario Power Works at Niagara Falls. Constantly improvising, when his growing network of hydroelectric plants faltered for lack of workers able to learn the complexities of the new high voltage, alternating current technology, he devised a plan to attract able high school graduates and teach them through a series of apprenticeships. As a matter of business economics, he would use democratic educational methods to encourage personal and social responsibility, concentrating his efforts on the most promising young men he could find.

At the hub of his operations, the Olmsted Power Station in Provo Canyon, Utah, Nunn established the Telluride Institute in a state-of-the-art four-story brick building packed with classrooms, laboratories, and a library. His educational model consisted of four steps: each student could progress from an initial year of full-time labor (during which the potential of the youth was assessed), to a year of half-time study and half-time labor (with additional assessment), to a year of full-time study. If his students thrived at level three, then Nunn underwrote their tuition to attend a leading electrical engineering program, preferably at Cornell University (his favorite) or Ohio State University. At the heyday of this system in 1910, he was supporting hundreds of students at these and other universities. By this time, however, his interest in educating future engineers was fading in favor of studies in history, literature, and
philosophy. Why? Initially, because he wanted his labor force to be able to manage its own affairs at remote powerplants. An interest in strengthening democratic institutions remained a hatchling. He had not yet encountered John Dewey.

To extend his educational work, Nunn founded and endowed the Telluride Association in 1911, establishing a scholarship house on the edge of the Cornell University campus. He urged his most able students to live there when they left Olmsted and matriculated at Cornell. Experimenting boldly with student empowerment, Nunn relinquished control so that Telluride quickly became an independent, self-governing, self-perpetuating, scholarship-granting institution. It survives today.

In his early sixties and suffering from tuberculosis, Nunn was pleased with Telluride, but it was not enough to satisfy his growing desire to prepare leaders to serve the broadening democracy of the United States. With the technical challenges of the hydropower industry largely in hand, he turned to the challenge of developing leaders to serve the nation. Rethinking the whole college experience to serve that purpose was on his mind.

Having won a legal battle for control of the Telluride Power Company in 1912, Nunn immediately sold that company and most of his other businesses. He then became something of a gadfly, joining the ferment of public intellectuals experimenting with new educational ideas supportive of democracy. Especially intriguing to him were the works of Alexander Meiklejohn, author of “The Freedom of the College,” and John Dewey, who was finishing his epic, Democracy and Education. Nunn corresponded with both reformers and established a personal friendship with Cornell's president, Andrew D. White, whose A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom triggered his curiosity. He was also struck by Professor John Erskine at Columbia University who was writing The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent.
When Nunn was founding Deep Springs, Erskine was spearheading Columbia's notable General Honors course with the aim of strengthening students’ participation in democratic processes.

For these educational reformers, the destabilizing effects of industrialization and immigration, coupled with growing national anxieties over, required re-thinking the foundations of democracy. "We never educate directly," John Dewey wrote capturing Nunn's imagination, "but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference." Nunn was struck by this notion. The place as well as the program would figure prominently in his plans.

But Dewey spoke to Nunn in a more profound way as well. "A democracy is more than a form of government," he wrote in Democracy and Education," it is primarily a form of...living...of experience.... "Each [person] has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, ...equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity." Dewey continued that "a great diversity of stimuli" is essential to prepare students for democratic engagement. He, more than anyone, captured the spirit of this movement that regarded democracy as a primary ethical value.

Clearly, Dewey gave L.L. Nunn specific ideas to incorporate in his budding project: the importance of location, the need for natural consequences to prompt responsibility for one's actions, and the vital role that a diversity of ideas and perspectives plays in learning. In addition, Alexander Meiklejohn bolstered Nunn's commitment to the freedom of the student in learning, coupled directly with responsibility for the welfare of the community in which they are embedded.
After several years of self-directed study, Nunn launched Deep Springs College in September 1917, basing its educational program on three pillars: student self-governance, personal responsibility in labor, and the study of the liberal arts and sciences—all designed to instill an ethic of service to humanity. He aimed to prepare genuinely free individuals who would commit their lives to the common good.

Nunn’s pragmatic ideas faced one grave challenge after another. As a gay man, he knew what it meant to live on the margins of society. He loathed racial bigotry, religious fanaticism, political indoctrination, and fraud of any kind; each of which wormed its way dangerously close to the heart of his college during its first century.

Why and how has Deep Springs remained loyal to its founder’s vision and adapted successfully to a rapidly changing society? A 1946 alumnus, Park Honan, may have come closest to an answer when he reflected on the meaning of his education: “Deep Springs means to discourage any passive attitude toward life, by which responsibility is allowed to go by default to those who always stand ready to seize it unworthily.” The college has had its share of unworthy aspirants and forgettable moments, but it adapts and persists because its perennial champions, the students, and the alumni, remain doggedly determined that his experiment in educational democracy remains true to its beginnings as well as relevant to a changing society.

Notable here, is that L.L. Nunn appointed loyal friends and business partners to guide the college after his death, not major figures like John Dewey and Meiklejohn, both of whom apparently stood ready to serve this fledgling experiment. Why nor capitalize on their interest and experience? Because he feared they would take the college in their own directions, rather than stay with the model he had worked out. His decision would have near-catastrophic consequences, with arguably beneficial results in the long run.
The Place

Nunn wanted to anchor his college on a farm or ranch to give his students work requiring hands-on responsibility. He considered options from Virginia's tidelands to the King Ranch near Corpus Christi, Texas. His decades of entrepreneurial endeavors in Colorado and Utah had inspired a profound respect for the grandeur and solitude of the deserts of the American West. Thus, when an aide apprised him that Arch Farrington’s ranch in Deep Springs Valley in eastern California was up for sale, Nunn jumped on the opportunity.

He believed Deep Springs’ inspiring physical setting and wild remoteness, with the ranch situated alone in a valley four times the size of Manhattan Island (135 square miles) and six 14,000-foot peaks in the Sierra-Nevada Range visible on the western horizon, would foster contemplation, inspiration, and inborn spirituality. Equally vital, he believed that encountering powerful natural forces, from blizzards to flash floods, as well as handling animals large enough to do them in, would require students to develop strengths to face adversity and demand teamwork and community action. The synergy of philosophy and place, aims and actions, would prove more than favorable. Nunn closed on the purchase in April 1917, just as the US entered WWI. He constructed the first college buildings that summer and welcomed his charter class that September. His tuberculosis was advancing. He had no time to waste.

Self-Governance and Ground Rules

Education at Deep Springs is based on three co-equal pillars, student self-governance, labor responsibility, and academic learning. Nunn appointed Earnest Thornhill, a protege of John Dewey from the University of Chicago, to serve as his first dean, but gave students power and responsibility that limited his reach in every direction. In the Deed of Trust, he required students to observe two ground rules as a condition of membership in the Student Body. Known
informally as the “isolation policy,” the use of tobacco and alcohol (later interpreted to include mind-altering drugs) was forbidden and students were required to eschew social relationships in the nearby towns of Big Pine and Bishop. His goal was complete, clear-headed devotion to the Deep Springs community.

Courageously, Nunn put the student body itself in charge of defining and enforcing these rules. Observance of this policy has varied widely, and abuses have not been infrequent. “The freedom that the students have possessed is not in contradiction to the purpose of Deep Springs,” Nunn wrote. “It is a means of promoting it. I want students to know the eternal truths of the universe. But I want them to do more than know these truths; I want them to live them.”

From its beginning, Deep Spring has been a secular institution although its founder and prevailing practices have often been sympathetic to personal spiritual observance.

Labor Program and Accountability
The freedom Nunn granted students came not only with the responsibility to build a strong community, but also to operate what is now a largely organic farm and cattle ranch under the guidance of professional staff members and a student-elected “labor commissioner” (or foreman). Students benefit from rare opportunities to understand the production of food and fiber, processes from which their contemporaries are now almost completely removed. More important, perhaps, these agricultural operations are working laboratories, joining theory and practice in land stewardship and sustainable agriculture. The agricultural foundation of Deep Springs, sometimes thought to be archaic fifty years ago, has become more salient than ever in the twenty-first century.

Academic Learning and Intellectual Rigor
From its beginning, Deep Springs was arguably the most unusual liberal arts college in the world on the largest campus anywhere. With a student body of fewer than thirty members and offering only the liberal or general education half of a baccalaureate degree (it is a two-year institution with full immersion summer and winter), its campus is an oasis at the center of a ranch with grazing allotments that spread over a quarter of a million acres of California and Nevada desert. Farm and ranch labor rival academic demands for students’ time, and the college duels with institutions such as Harvard, Caltech, and MIT to claim the most promising high school graduates. The college is at once a bold twentieth-century experiment in higher education and an evocation to the university’s most ancient origins.

Medieval Italian universities such as Bologna and Padua began over eight centuries ago when students formed self-governing guilds and hired master scholars to teach them. So serious were these young seekers that some required their teachers to post a bond before leaving town—to assure their return. Deep Springs is, in a sense, a re-creation of these radical beginnings. The college works, sometimes brilliantly, because students are at the center of every aspect of their education, labor, and community. It is a strenuous life, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, after which students transfer to other leading institutions to pursue their major requirements and complete their undergraduate degrees.

In practical terms, Deep Springs takes sound principles of teaching and scholarship to their limits. Learning is stimulated by the need to solve problems and for the sheer joy of exploration and understanding. Students govern their own affairs and take the lead in choosing the faculty, designing the liberal arts curriculum, running the admissions process, deciding whether their peers should be invited to return for a second year, and writing and editing official publications. The students also cook many of the meals for the community, operate the library
and bookstore, plant, weed, and harvest the garden, milk the cows, irrigate the fields, mow and bale the hay, herd the cattle, and operate the heavy equipment. They also do the humdrum work of washing dishes, making guest beds, cleaning toilets, and mopping floors — all tasks essential to the smooth running of any community.

The curriculum complimented and balanced with the labor program and student self-governance, with each of these three placing similar demands on students’ time and energy. While remaining within the bounds of liberal arts colleges elsewhere, it leans toward the Deweyan principle that learning follows curiosity and the need to know. Courses are proposed by members of the faculty on a two-options-offered for each course to be taught basis. The curriculum committee makes the selections, based on student interest and proper distribution across academic disciplines. A natural check on rogue courses (bizarre titles or parochial content) is the need for a transcript that transfers easily to the University of California or wherever the student may wish to study next. Each student is encouraged to take a balance of courses across the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and fine arts, creating a transcript comparable to the general education requirements of the receiving college or university. If a student fails to do this, of course, they face the necessity of meeting these standards later, when they enroll in a baccalaureate program.

The college’s pedagogy is distinctly Socratic. Few classes enroll more than five students. They are expected to arrive in the seminar room or professor’s living room with questions to ask and ideas relative to the readings or other content. The professor’s role is usually closer to that of mentor than teacher. Students are expected to respond critically to course content, to seek applicability in the world about them, and to push beyond the known. The faculty vary greatly in their teaching philosophies and practices. Some believe the last thing they should do is urge
students to consider the practical application (at least immediately) of any idea or text encountered in their courses. Still, the community of students, faculty, staff, and their families is constantly abuzz with conversations about ideas percolating from one course or another. Another feature of life in this community is that everyone eats together in a lovely dining hall with round tables that facilitate conversations. The presence of young children often lightens and enlivens these community meals.

Community

Communal life revolves around two weekly gatherings, one exclusive to the student body, the other encompassing everyone. The former occurs on Friday evenings and is closed to everyone except students and occasional invited guests. This is the place where student self-governance is hammered out – from re-hiring professors or critiquing ranch operations to defining or enforcing the isolation policy Nunn established to insure sobriety and devotion to community responsibility. Student Body meetings often go on into the wee hours of night.

The second weekly gathering, one that includes the whole community, is Public Speaking, typically on a Tuesday evening. Along with a first-year writing course, this is the only class students are required to take and take it every term they must. Faculty take turns teaching it, and do it in different ways, but these gatherings are a forum to present new ideas and practices to the community, critique national or world events, and explore issues that may be dividing members of the community. It is hard to imagine Deep Springs life without public speaking, which takes place either in the spacious living room of the Main Building or, in good weather, on the spacious front porch of that building. Wherever the speakers hold forth, this public airing of ideas and conflicts is essential to the health of community life. It prompts a constant re-examination of college’s mission.
Deep Springs operates on a twelve-month calendar, not the typical eight months of other colleges, because agricultural operations don’t take four months off (especially in growing season). Also, students require more time to earn the necessary credits for transfer because their energy is divided among coursework, labor, and self-governance responsibilities.

The admissions committee receives about three to six hundred complete applications each year. The number is relatively small for three reasons: (1) selection criteria are known to be stiff; (2) college life at Deep Springs is ascetic by any standard; and (3) applicants must write five or six essays just to merit full consideration. Forty finalists are invited to spend three to five days at Deep Springs at their own expense (if they cannot pay for their own travel, the college pitches in), usually in groups of three to five. During these visits, each applicant participates fully in the academic and labor programs. On their final day, they face their potential peers in an hour-long interview in which they are quizzed in depth about the essays they submitted with their applications.

Following these visits, the student Applications Committee typically recommends fourteen or fifteen candidates for admission. The college's president must approve the recommendations, but rarely finds reason to differ with the committee’s judgments. Of those who are admitted, almost all accept the opportunity and responsibility of membership in the student body. For most incoming classes, all members will return for their second year. There are exceptions, however, for personal reasons and because of group dynamics gone awry. Rarely are there grounds for the student body or the president not to invite a student for a second year.

While no cut-off level is set for standardized test scores (indeed their submission is optional) or high school grade points, the average SAT score for those admitted is in the top two percent nationally. About July 1 each year, the newly admitted students join their second-year
peers. A year later, it will be they who carry the ethics and culture of Deep Springs forward to the next entering class.

The college attracts students from all over the nation and the world. Religious, political, and cultural diversity is central to this educational environment, and the contrasts within the student body are always strong. Sharp differences of opinion or judgment abound, but they are frequently buffered by spontaneous humor.

The purpose of Deep Springs is to prepare principled, capable, and sagacious leaders to strengthen democratic societies. When candidates accept admission, they are expected to share fully in creating a robust and healthy community, setting self-interest aside and working unstintingly for the community’s welfare. They will participate in virtually every decision that bears on their education, directly or indirectly, from academic policies and faculty and staff selections to budget expenditures and endowment holdings.

Nunn regarded his students as the “beneficial owners” of the college. No tuition and fees have ever been levied, despite some very lean years, making it clear that students are neither consumers (tuition-payers) nor honorees (scholarship recipients). To make his point even clearer, Nunn specified in the Deed of Trust that one of the nine trustees would be a fully empowered student member, embracing student participation in governance a half-century before the rest of higher education recognized its importance. When the trustees expanded their membership to thirteen in the early 1990s, they granted the student body a second seat, thereby enhancing rather than diluting the students’ influence.

Coeducation

A men’s college at its founding, converting to coeducation was an inflammatory issue at Deep Springs starting in the late 1960s. Then, for many years, admitting women was supported
by most students and younger alumni but opposed by a majority of older and more influential graduates. But the latter groups held a trump card. With no tuition or fees to support the educational program, generous senior alumni held the keys to admitting women. It is worth noting that virtually every position at the college, including ranch manager, had been held by a woman at one time or another. The professorial ranks, certainly, have been populated by women and men since the 1940s.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, more senior alumni were reconsidering coeducation while other diehards had passed. After a 1995 board of trustees truce in the conflict that enabled the warring sides to unite to save the college from bankruptcy, the Trustees of Deep Springs returned to the issue (as promised) and voted overwhelmingly in 2011 to admit women. But two board dissenters sought to block implementation in court. They argued that an all-male student body was an essential element of Nunn's educational project. The legal battle continued for three years. A decision from the Superior Court of California on November 19, 2014, solidly supported the trustees’ decision to admit women as well as men.

Still, the dissenters persisted and took the case to the California Court of Appeals. When they lost once more at that level, they appealed to the Supreme Court of California. On the eve of the gala One Hundredth Anniversary celebration of Deep Springs' founding, held in the valley on Independence Day weekend 2017, the Supreme Court issued its ruling that the lower courts' decisions would stand. After a half-century of controversy, the college began its second century on cue as a coeducational institution of higher learning. As many advocates had hoped and expected, the essential nature of the college has remained unchanged, while the presence of women within the student body and in all elements of the program has been, by nearly all accounts, highly beneficial.
The Ethic of Service to Humanity

Graduates take with them an onus to serve humanity, thus dispatching their debt to the college and embodying the essence of their extraordinary learning experiences. Embracing that responsibility with an abundance of heart is the ethic of the college, passed down from generation to generation of students. Most Deep Springs’ graduates go on to complete their undergraduate degrees at Brown University, the University of Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Stanford, U.C. Berkeley, or Yale. A 1982 study I authored found that over half of the alumni eventually earned academic or professional doctorates.17

Among its more than one thousand graduates, Deep Springs counts four Rhodes Scholars, three MacArthur Fellows, at least twelve Truman Scholars, four U.S. ambassadors, several college and university presidents, many distinguished professors in diverse fields, two Members of Congress, and winners of the National Book Award for Fiction and a Pulitzer Prize. Most alumni have pursued careers in diplomacy, education, health, journalism, law, public policy, or other service professions less prestigious but equally important. Nunn believed a good and innovative blacksmith is as valuable to society as a good and innovative member of the US Senate, a principle embraced with savor at Deep Springs across the years. Many alumni are highly involved in their local communities.

Perilous Passages

Any small community is precarious, subject to the style, values, or inadequacies of a succession of formal and informal leaders. Deep Springs is no exception, and it has reached the edge of collapse more than once. Among its existential threats have been on-site incompetence and corruption that nearly doomed the experiment in the 1930s, antisemitism among the trustees in the 1940s and 1950s, a president bent on McCarthyism a decade later, a flirtation with
community-wide free love in the 1970s, discontinuities in leadership through the 1980s and early 1990s, the very real threat of bankruptcy in 1995, and the decades-long struggle over coeducation that spanned four decades.

One way or another, L.L. Nunn’s high principles and Deep Springs’ method prevailed time after time, often with the student body leading the way as the students did successfully in exposing a cattle-rustling ranch manager (and relative of the board chair), facing down racism, and ousting the president bent upon ideological indoctrination. Inspired by the founder’s social ethics and his call to serve, and willing to risk everything, they refused to let their school be hijacked by those who would undermine its integrity or their idealism.

One of the strange ironies of this story is that when the “adult leaders” of the college – its trustees, faculty, staff, and president – have failed from incompetence, ethical lapses, or lack of courage, the students have often stepped in to fill the breach. Taking their “beneficial ownership” literally, they have refused to surrender their institution to forces that would diminish or seriously misdirect it. Although these passages have been excruciating for the students who experienced them, they have also become central to the unfolding saga of student responsibility for the integrity and resilience of Deep Springs. Even when the college has failed, it has succeeded in playing out its purposes.

Philosophy of Education

Infused with educational ideas from Dewey, Meiklejohn, and others, Nunn’s philosophy evolved on-site at Deep Springs. It was captured serendipitously in a series of letters he wrote to the student body over the last five years of his life. Too ill and short of breath to live at Deep Springs’ high elevation (4,200 feet) after 1919, he retreated to his home in Los Angeles and variously admonished, cajoled, and occasionally bullied the students with impassioned letters.
After his death, the students assembled these letters and published them, including the Deed of Trust and other documents with which Nunn established Deep Springs. Known as the “Gray Book,” for the color of its cover (the content is anything but bland), it has been kept in print in one form or another to this day. Although Nunn died in 1925 at age seventy-two, his inimitable style and sharpness of wit continue to capture the interest and imagination of each new wave of students.

From my years of experience at the college, as a student, young professor, trustee, and president, I think of its principles on two levels. First, its philosophy of learning and, second, its pedagogy or teaching practices. One pertains to the grand scheme for turning teenaged youths into high functioning adults, the other for developing students' ethical core to control and direct their emerging powers. The end is to prepare leaders with both vision and integrity to serve the common good.

Philosophy of Learning:

The Deep Springs philosophy of learning is a blend of L.L. Nunn’s educational philosophy with a century of practice and adaptation on site. It can be understood as a series of steps:

- Attract and enroll the most promising high school graduates available.
- Grant them unusual freedom and great responsibility.
- Expect them to succeed and expect things to go wrong.
- Allow natural consequences of failure to instruct, rather than adult judgment.
- Offer tangible support and continue to trust as long as possible.

After a century of experience, the overwhelming conclusion is that 18- and 19-year-olds can accept responsibility and performing at near-professional levels with surprising consistency. And
it is the college’s small scale and the interdependence of its members that make it possible to substitute (for the most part) natural consequences for authoritative evaluations. Cook a lousy meal, and you hear from your peers. Leave the dairy cows unattended, and no milk or butter at meals. Make a weak argument in class and suffer embarrassment. There is nowhere to hide in this community. Generally, that is an asset.

What sets Deep Springs apart from most institutions is the acceptance of failure in the process of learning to succeed. Upon arriving here, many students like their peers in other highly selective college programs, have succeeded at almost everything they have tried (sometimes because they have avoided risking embarrassment or their GPA). Deep Springs seeks to disabuse students of any illusions of omnipotence or fear of failure. This is true for two reasons: First, they are surrounded only by students of equal but diverse gifts, so it is not possible to win at everything. Second, students are presented perforce with tasks they cannot avoid but that challenge them in areas they could not anticipate. A high school 4.0 student is faced suddenly with need to rope a dashing calf, milk a surly cow, or repair a broken baling machine quickly before rain dowses the freshly mown alfalfa. Feel like a klutz? Facing a long learning curve? The labor program, especially, plays many roles.

Academic Pedagogy

Deep Springs’ theory of academic learning is more complex but equally edgy. It can be summarized as follows:

- Focus on the most significant issues facing students and society
  - across the board from the arts to science and technology.
- Bring students in contact with as many pertinent arguments as possible.
• Diversity of personal backgrounds and perspectives is essential here.

• Provide access to as much information as possible.
  o Consider many sources, while learning to vet for authentication.

• Charge students with creating viable and ethical solutions to every problem.
  o Philosophical arguments abound here.

• Give students time and space to work through the issues with their peers.
  o Strong peer relationships are essential to this method.

• Expect excellent arguments to support individual and group conclusions.
  o Setting high standards for argumentation and presentation are key faculty roles, as is modeling judicious investigation of evidence.

With the freedom to think together and arrive at personal conclusions and group decisions on their own, students take ownership of their values. This sense of ownership includes the inherent right to change one's mind as new evidence comes into view or better arguments come into focus. It is at the center of living consciously and creating healthy communities. Deep Springs is hardly alone in aiming for these objectives, but I have never seen them realized so consistently in any other college or university setting. I believe this is the secret to understanding the many high achievements of the graduates of this tiny institution.

We also see in this method the building of potent natural defenses against ideological indoctrination, religious bigotry, and political extremism, all fundamental concerns from the origin of the college. We cannot pursue the aim of thinking right without the risk of thinking wrong, but invariably more thinking is the antidote to wrong thinking. And free and earnest peers can prompt our thinking or prick our conscience even when we feel certain about the ground on which we stand.

The genius in Nunn’s call to serve the human community is that he refused to define “service” or “community.” Rather, each student (as well as every member of the faculty and
staff) must hammer out their personal definitions. Deep Springs’ students, therefore, live and study with a consciousness that much has been given them and that even more will be expected of them. But they must figure how and where to make their marks.

Deep Springs in Context

In *The Distinctive College*, a case study of Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore, Burton R. Clark argued that the work of transformational leaders and the continuing successes of innovative colleges depend on the emergence of “organizational sagas” that perpetuate their daring and noble identities. These sagas shape the aspirations and steel the nerves of successive generations of alumni, faculty, and trustees – sometimes with “cultish overtones,” as historian John Thelin observed. Yet if these heroic legends fade, a distinctive college can lose its edge or expire, as did Antioch College (established in 1853) in 2008. Antioch’s revival three years later tapped the saga initiated by Horace Mann and added a new chapter. Deep Spring’s saga is rich from its initial charismatic figure and his trove of engaging letters to the Student Body, to its many scrapes with institutional oblivion, only to set itself aright and continue with new strengths. Further, its stunning geographical location leaves the community vulnerable to summer flash floods that close the passes for weeks, or winter blizzards that leave the college isolated for days. These periodic events add to the unfolding story of struggle, survival, and resilience.

If the saga of Deep Springs and its founder matter, so do its philosophical foundations and high purposes. David Riesman and Gerald Grant argued in *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*, that most attempts to improve undergraduate education only tinker by making incremental changes. Adding incentives for excellent teaching, striving to recruit more qualified students, or urging the creation of new courses, may enliven

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/eshj/vol5/iss1/2
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programs of study but will not transform the student experience or prepare young people to meet new societal conditions.

What interested Riesman and Grant were the rare colleges that attempted to make “telic reforms”—alternative models of undergraduate education driven by a coherent educational philosophy. Because “telic reforms could be thought of as counterrevolutionary, that is, as counter to the rise of research universities,” they swim against the current. It is often academic outsiders or peripheral players like L.L. Nunn who sensed a critical need for new methods and mustered the courage and resources to give them life. He saw undergraduate study as an end in itself – resulting in personal enrichment and political, social, or aesthetic engagement – rather than as preparation for graduate school and professional life. Those things would come if the foundations were well laid.

An unlikely disciple of John Dewey, given his largely industrial career, Nunn started something that has outlasted most laboratory schools on university campuses that he set in motion a century ago, and most other pragmatic attempts to implement democratic methods in higher education. Nunn's potent blend of idealism and pragmatism has motivated students for eleven decades, and it promises to continue without faltering on its daring path.

The most vexing question surrounding Deep Springs is the degree to which this experiment can be scaled up or replicated. Can a college with 500 students adopt policies that include students much more fully in curricular decision-making? Could every private university benefit from full-fledged student trustees? Is Deep Springs' highly selective admissions policy essential to its successes with educational democracy, or irrelevant to those achievements? I am increasingly optimistic on all accounts, but convincing other professors, presidents, and trustees to take a chance with greater student authority is an uphill pull. In an era of severe challenges to
democracy and democratic institutions in the United States and abroad, the importance of the Deep Springs experiment seems greater than ever.

The Future

Like the 4,854-year-old Methuselah Bristlecone Pine, Deep Springs College remains viable and is broadcasting seedlings. After inspiring changes in teaching and learning in existing institutions (such as reforms I led and championed for many decades at the University of Utah), Deep Springs has recently spawned a new generation of undergraduate reformers. Two alumni are currently spearheading the creation of innovative new colleges. Bryden Sweeney-Taylor (Deep Springs, 1998) has been instrumental in founding Outer Coast College in Sitka, Alaska, and his Deep Springs classmate, Jacob Hundt, has founded Thoreau College in Viroqua, Wisconsin. In addition, Laura Marcus, a former Deep Springs staff member who went on to earn her doctorate in higher education at Stanford University, is the founder and co-executive director of the emerging Tidelines Institute on the cusp of Glacier Bay in Gustavus, Alaska.

These three start-up institutions are leading the new class of progressive/experimental colleges springing up to challenge the corporatization of American universities. If higher education is now regarded widely by policy makers as a private good, designed to launch students into lucrative careers and drive the economic life of the nation, then Deep Springs and its budding protégés provide a sharp reminder that a college education must also serve as a public good. These colleges are designed to challenge students to build viable communities and develop habits of discourse, reflection, and sacrifice for the greater good. Their students learn responsibility, become community-builders, and prize democratic processes by living and studying in environments that demand their full participation.
In a withering political environment nationally, Deep Springs College continues to test the limits of democracy in education and now issues progeny. The saga continues.

5 Newell, *The Electric Edge*, 23-36. Just as children teach their grandparents computing skills today, Nunn found that teenagers were quickest to embrace the electrical technology his enterprise demanded.
6 In fact, Nunn anticipated a lawsuit over control of his Telluride Power Company. To protect his assets for continued educational experimentation, he transferred half his fortune to Telluride Association and handed control to its membership. They were chiefly the students he was supporting at Cornell. Thus, Nunn had a compelling practical interest in educational democracy that matched his waxing philosophical commitment.
12 Ibid., 101.
13 Newell, *Electric Edge*, 57. Nunn did not live to see Meiklejohn found his notable Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, nor his visit to Deep Springs in the early 1930s.
14 Park Honan, August 11, 1964, Alumni Essays, Subgroup 23, Box 2, folder 3, Deep Springs Archives.
15 Estimating what Nunn paid for the ranch is difficult because it came in several parcels, some purchased from other small owners, and included the acquisition of water rights scattered throughout the valley. To escape inflated prices due to his notoriety, he sent agents to buy most of these properties. They passed them through to Nunn and were fully compensated.
16 “L.L. Nunn’s letters copied from the addenda to biography, Jurisdiction,” 5 (not published), Subgroup 15, Box 1, folder 8, Deep Springs Archives.
19 Thelin’s comment was offered in a personal conversation with the author.
21 Ibid., 17.
22 Among the Deep Springs principles and practices of education that I incorporated in university-wide undergraduate programs at the University of Utah during my sixteen years as Dean of Liberal Education were designing the curriculum committee with one-third of its membership being students, building a required core series of courses that were interdisciplinary, problem-based, and taught by some of the campus's most respected professors, and encouraging a culture of free inquiry in these Liberal Education courses. Liberal Education was the name we chose for these undergraduate requirements, rather and general education, to make the point that these courses were designed to encourage free and responsible thinking in all students. The fine arts were included as equal participants in the four-part set of required courses, along with the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. This Liberal Education Program also highlighted connections to public service opportunities in the surrounding community. By 2023, the last of these reforms had been erased from University of Utah policies and practices, including changing the name of undergraduate requirements back to general education.