

# **Another Education Is Possible: The Closing of Antioch College and the Story of the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute**

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Antioch College was closed by the Board of Trustees of Antioch University on June 30, 2008 after an intensive year-long struggle to save the 155-year-old institution. This was the fourth suspension of operations in the College's history. Opening its doors in 1853, the College was declared bankrupt by 1858—the first of many insolvencies, declarations of financial exigency, payless paydays, and salary cuts. Alongside this checkered financial history, however, the small liberal arts college carved out a well-deserved reputation at the forefront of both the Old and New Left and as a laboratory for progressive education in the U.S. When this precious legacy was put at risk, the victim of corporatizing trends in higher education, Antiochians united to fight back.

Many of Antioch College's educational experiments, seen as outlandish at the time, have now passed into common practice. From its inception the College employed female faculty and admitted women students to the same curriculum as male students; students of mixed race were accepted in the 1850's and by 1863 the Board of Trustees had decreed that no student could be excluded "on account of color." In the 1920's, influenced in large part by John Dewey's theories of applied learning and education for participatory citizenship, the College pioneered its highly successful "co-operative education" program, alternating on-campus semesters of liberal arts courses with semesters of paid work and research. This period also witnessed the deliberate cultivation of town-gown partnerships and enterprises designed to support the local economy while providing experiential opportunities for students. In the following years, the College implemented a governance structure that included student representation in decision-making at all levels, including the hiring and tenuring of faculty, and an honor system for student examinations. It abolished letter grades in the 1960's in favor of personalized narratives. The outward-looking emphasis of the co-op program was augmented in the 1950's by Antioch Education Abroad, one of the first

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international study programs in the U.S., and a decade later by the creation of traveling Environmental Field Programs led by recent Antioch graduates.

At the time of its closure in 2008, Antioch College was the flagship campus of Antioch University. The history of what was first described as a “network,” then a “federation,” and then Antioch University began from the most idealistic of motives, with a directive from the College Board of Trustees in the mid-1960s to extend its educational opportunities to traditionally underserved populations. This led to establishing experimental field programs and mini-campuses all over the country, aimed at communities in Appalachia, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., at Native American reservations, migrant work sites, and in prisons. Still more mini-campuses were engendered through the ambitious initiative known as the University Without Walls, which came about through Antioch’s leadership in the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities. Some of these campuses were quite substantial operations; the Antioch School of Law was particularly respected in progressive legal circles. They were also quite successful in terms of reaching large numbers of nontraditional and diverse students. Programs multiplied rapidly, and soon satellites were sending out satellites with a total of somewhere (to this day no one knows exactly) between 35 and 40 mini-Antiochs. The award for the most eccentric campus goes to the Antioch branch in Columbia, Maryland, a one-acre portable college in a giant vinyl bubble (unfortunately, last-minute cost-cutting on the air conditioning meant that the internal temperature became unbearable and all within the bubble ended up poached).<sup>1</sup>

The College’s noble experiment in taking education to the streets—or in arrogant empire-building, depending on one’s perspective—created tremendous confusion in terms of mundane details such as registration, faculty supervision, and tuition payment, and by the time the Board decided to fire the ambitious president who had presided over the chaos, the College finances were in shambles. In the 1980s, the College was rescued by another ambitious president who consolidated the most stable of the “adult” campuses still standing and organized them into a new entity designated Antioch University, made up of the residential liberal arts college plus commuter campuses in Seattle, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Keene, New Hampshire and Antioch McGregor in Yellow Springs. Today, these campuses provide a variety of continuing education and graduate programs for adults in such fields as Leadership, Management, Creative Writing, Psychology and Education Certification. However, these institutions evolved without implementing a tenure system, using instead a small group of core faculty (most have PhD’s) to administer programs that rely heavily on adjuncts, practitioners, and short-term contracts with faculty at other institutions. And, with the exception of Antioch McGregor, the staff at the commuter campuses is not represented by a collective bargaining unit. Antioch University therefore came to encompass two very different kinds of educational models—models with incompatible assumptions about governance. While the College’s curriculum and indeed its very ethos were steeped in ideals of community participation, democratic process,

and academic freedom, University campuses prized efficiency and the minimizing of fixed costs. The President of Antioch University McGregor, Barbara Gellman-Danley, touted her reported 2007 staffing of 18 fulltime faculty members who teach 750 adult learners with the help of 150 adjuncts as “a tight ship,” insisting that her strength was “running a good business model.”<sup>2</sup>

### Antioch Abandoned

By the late 1990s, the stress inherent in the juxtaposition of these two organizational paradigms was manifest, and the relationship between the liberal arts college in Yellow Springs and the far-flung satellite campuses was becoming increasingly tense. The University leadership sought to use (some would say usurp) the name recognition of the historic College while distancing itself from college traditions of faculty governance, academic freedom protected by tenure, student participation in committees, and political activism. A full account of the gradual disintegration of the College-University relationship and the increasing micromanaging of the College by distant University administrators can be found in the American Association of University Professors Report, “Antioch University and the Closing of Antioch College,” released this past September.

As the AAUP Report observes, “By the beginning of this decade, Antioch College’s system of shared governance had become limited to reacting to decisions made at the university level by the board and the chancellor.”<sup>3</sup> One indicator of the decline in governance at the once free-standing College is the fact that out of the six College presidents who served between 1996 and 2008, five were selected with virtually no input from the faculty. A series of lay-offs and consolidations in a financial reorganization imposed by the University leadership deprived the College of its own Chief Financial Officer and the College President of a direct relationship with the Board; from 2001 the President reported only to the Chancellor. Investigative journalist Brian Springer explains that the body “responsible and accountable for” the College’s administrative leadership became the University Leadership Council (ULC), comprised of the Chancellor, the University Chief Financial Officer, and the presidents of the six campuses, most of whom had no previous experience with liberal arts colleges.<sup>4</sup> A decade of pleas by successive College presidents for more attention to the college’s needs fell on deaf ears. As one wrote to then-Chancellor Jim Craiglow: “While it seems to me that any University Strategic Planning effort would address . . . the specific issues of what it will take to sustain such a distinctive residential undergraduate liberal arts program within the framework of a federal University, the financial modeling I’ve seen thus far has been aimed at standardizing, rationalizing, and achieving equity across the campuses, with little regard for the history, circumstance or distinctiveness of the College.”<sup>5</sup>

In 2004, the Board of Trustees and the ULC stepped up micro-management of the College by mandating a “renewal plan”—a new interdisciplinary curriculum that abolished departments and proposed to alter the teacher/student ratio from 1:8 or 1:9 to 1:15 (in

other words, to reduce the number of faculty positions). Sold to the faculty as a last-ditch effort to put the College on the road to financial stability, the faculty was presented with the task of designing and implementing a logistical nightmare in little over a year. Throughout this period, the faculty struggled mightily to maintain some semblance of a liberal arts curriculum, despite ever-decreasing infrastructure and with staffing cuts in academic programs, academic support, and student services. Neither complacent nor ignorant of the college's problems, faculty lacked the means through which to make concerns heard. While some faculty left, many stayed, still compelled by the challenges and rewards of teaching a bright, intellectually curious student body. Numerous academic quality indicators, such as national rankings in the survey of student engagement (NSSE), numbers of students obtaining Fulbrights, their rates of acceptance to top graduate programs and of completion of PhD's, remained stellar.

The new curriculum imposed on the College by the Board of Trustees either failed to attract students, or the confusion resulting from the curricular overhaul implemented too quickly made it difficult to explain and to market. Existing students were given incentives to graduate early in order to avoid the delivery of two different curricula at the same time. The unsurprising result was that enrollments dropped significantly. With an incoming class in fall 2005 of only 68 students, the situation turned dire. Although the Board of Trustees had promised to support the College through the inevitable hemorrhages caused by the "renewal," this turned out not to be the case. Donations to the College had been falling away. As morale plummeted, a new Director of Communications issued an e-mail bulletin cheerfully named "The Good News Newsletter."

The "cultures" of the College and University continued to diverge and the presidents of the other campuses were encouraged to regard the College as more liability than asset. Gellman-Danley of Antioch McGregor cultivated relations with business leaders in the Dayton area, particularly those with connections to the nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and new funding sources under the Bush Administration's Homeland Security initiatives. In an attempt literally to detach Antioch McGregor from Antioch College, Gellman-Danley ordered the construction of a new \$15 million facility at the opposite end of the town of Yellow Springs, moving into the 6,000-square-foot space in 2007. As the *Yellow Springs News* reported, "Some have wondered how a new building for McGregor was financed while the [college] campus just across the street was crumbling."<sup>6</sup> The controversy that erupted at McGregor surrounding the building of the new campus and the separation from Antioch College was actively stifled—students' newsletters were taken from mailboxes and faculty were warned not to speak publicly against management decisions. This was one of several occasions when the McGregor president made it clear that traditional concepts of academic freedom did not apply under her administration.

In March 2007, the University Chancellor, Tullisse (Toni) Murdock, a former president of the Antioch University unit in Seattle, armed with a consultant's report that characterized the College's tenured

faculty and staff union as obstacles to a more flexible, market-oriented institution, informed the Board of Trustees that the College's continued deficits could soon jeopardize the entire University system. The report outlined three options for Board actions. The third option—that of suspending the operations of the College for a minimum of four years in order to “clear out the ghosts”—was the course of action explicitly identified as “the one preferred at this time by the university's management team.”<sup>7</sup> That June, without having turned to alumni for help, without having consulted with faculty as they were contractually obligated to do, without consultation with any of the many stakeholders involved in the fate of this historic institution, the Board of Trustees voted to put the flagship Antioch College to sleep.

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

Pleas of financial exigency also appeared questionable given the salaries and compensation received by University administrators. The year before she presided over the college's closing, Chancellor Murdock was listed as earning over \$532,491 in total salary and benefits (including deferred compensation of \$264,000). Gellman-Danley received \$399,328, including deferred compensation.<sup>8</sup>

In August 2007, Murdock unveiled a tentative plan for a “renewed Antioch College Yellow Springs” to be organized on the same model as the other University campuses—without tenure, and presumably without a unionized staff. The proposal called for a small core faculty of eight (Antioch College employed 44 full-time faculty that year) to administer a “high tech” version of a liberal arts education, linked to the other units via the web and assisted by virtual classrooms and a virtual commons.<sup>9</sup> Later this proposal was quietly dropped.

For an entire year, a coalition of outraged College alumni, faculty, staff, students, and citizens of Yellow Springs fought hard to have the decision to suspend operations reversed. This stage of the struggle involved multiple fronts, including a massive alumni fundraising campaign that began with raising half a million dollars over one weekend at the June alumni reunion, an amount that reached \$18 million in cash and pledges by the time of the October reunion. Other initiatives included a lawsuit filed by the tenured faculty that sought to prevent the closing of the College and the seizing of its assets; the formation of dozens of new alumni chapters; numerous petition and letter writing drives; protests from former trustees; town

meetings and rallies in the Village of Yellow Springs; letters of concern from the AAUP; and students and alumni haunting meetings of the Board. Efforts to rescue the College soon focused on obtaining a separation from its parent Antioch University, but the Board of Trustees turned down repeated offers by alumni to purchase the College. One group of wealthy alumni and former trustees, the Antioch College Continuation Corporation (ACCC), offered \$12.2 million for the College, with \$6 million down and the remainder to be paid over the next few years. The ACCC's insistence that they be ensured representation on the Board of Trustees was seen by the University as a "hostile takeover," so the University resisted the deal, demanding that all the money be paid in cash up front. Soon after, the University released a press statement declaring the College "up for sale" and making it known that they were "open to negotiations with any potential buyer."<sup>10</sup> This prompted a mock ad on the local Craigslist: "Antioch College no longer holds any substantial meaning or value to its Board of Trustees, beyond what it can be sold for on the open market. Offers by alumni groups promising to operate the college in a continuous manner, beholden to its traditional values of openness and academic freedom are particularly loathsome. Real Estate developers with proven military-industrial success are preferred."

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

The AAUP's investigation into the closing of Antioch College determined that Antioch University had violated numerous AAUP standards and guidelines—most obviously, that faculty governance at the College and faculty control over the College curriculum were repeatedly sidestepped. As the AAUP report states: "There can be little doubt that Antioch College's financial problems were in no small measure a product of managerial decisions made without faculty consultation, including a curricular experiment that was connected to a decline in enrollment and a decision to reduce financial support to the college from the university." The AAUP further found that academic freedom at the satellite campuses was infringed upon, and that the University's declaration of financial exigency in order to terminate employees and eliminate tenured positions remained unsubstantiated. Ultimately, the AAUP charged the Board of Trustees and the University administration with what amounts to gross dereliction of duty, noting, "It seems to the investigating committee not at all unreasonable to have expected the trustees to pursue the goal (the operation of Antioch College) for which the enterprise had been established . . . Unfortunately, the trustees and the administration of Antioch University seem to have lost sight of this purpose."<sup>11</sup>

In June 2009, College alumni at last succeeded in negotiating a deal with the University to regain the campus and the rights to the



name Antioch College. Keys to the campus buildings officially changed hands on September 4. This time, Antioch and its history sell for \$6 million.

Former Antioch student Jeanne Kay characterized Toni Murdock's plan to close Antioch College and open a new unit of the University in its place as the higher education version of the tactic Naomi Klein has named "neoliberal shock therapy."<sup>12</sup> In these cases, drastic actions are taken to displace people, demoralize resistance, erase established traditions, and generally "clean house" in order for outside interests to rebuild a national or local economy from the top down. In our own small example, a sanitized "Antioch Yellow Springs" was to be superimposed on the former Antioch College; a much reduced clone of the University's tenure-less, administrative-heavy units with little room for dissenting voices was to replace the College and its messy self-governance. Clearly Antioch's plight dramatized these common trends in the corporatization of higher education:

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

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

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

4) A succumbing to the "edifice complex"—prioritizing show-piece buildings and facilities over personnel; the construction of ever-larger (and often unnecessary) new buildings rather than the rehabilitation of existing usable spaces.

### **Claiming the Legacy: Antiochians Fight Back**

The decision to dispose of Antioch College was not one that faculty, alumni, staff, and students could accept. While our strategies evolved over time, and different constituencies worked in different arenas, we were united by certain core assumptions. We defined the suspension of the College as a financial and political *choice* made among other available options. This meant countering a number of convenient and widespread narratives—insisting that the College was not merely another regrettable casualty of prevailing economic winds, nor of its own anachronistic refusal to adapt to a changing marketplace. The closure was not a referendum on Antioch's progressive educational mission or curriculum. Nor was the College brought down by a disrespectful, dogmatic, or "toxic" student body (a view unfortunately given some support by President Lawry).

Our overarching goal was simply to refuse to cede the College to the University. In the winter of 2007-2008, frustrated at the Univer-

sity's intransigence, Antiochians began to contemplate taking Antioch College off campus if the new round of negotiations between the Alumni and the University Board of Trustees did not yield a more positive outcome. An ad hoc group of about thirty faculty, staff, alumni, and students met over a weekend in March 2008 and brainstormed about how to move forward. By the end of that weekend, we had sketched out a plan and a budget for a college in exile that we desperately hoped we would not need, and the Alumni Board had voted to commit its financial resources to the project. A month later, we learned that the University Board of Trustees had turned down the ACCC's final offer for the College and were proceeding with the closure. The members of the ACCC disbanded in disgust; planning for what became Nonstop Antioch began in earnest. Faculty and students stopped attending the hollow shell of community governance, the Administrative Council (Adcil), and created our own governing body, named ExCil, or Adcil-in-Exile. In May, eighteen Antioch College faculty—most of the tenured faculty at the time—signed up to teach with Antioch in Exile. Faculty then worked without pay from May through August to develop a curriculum, admissions and tuition policies, and a detailed budget. An Executive Collective was voted in, a group of three faculty members who would divide the leadership tasks of the new institution.

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

Antioch-in-Exile was eventually renamed the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute in response to a threatened lawsuit from Antioch University prohibiting us from using our own name, logo, or the letter "A" in any way that could evoke anything Antioch-esque. Taking our name and our vision from one of the slogans of the past year—"Nonstop Antioch"—we saw ourselves as part protest movement, part educational think tank, part holding tank for the progressive traditions and institutional memory of Antioch College. We often described ourselves as the carriers of Antioch's DNA; we also used the metaphor of Nonstop as a lifeboat or raft, salvaging as many bits of the sunken College as we could.

Our vision was nothing if not ambitious. We intended to keep Antioch's professional educators together in order to continue the



meaningful educational work we all feel called to do. We also wanted to apply ourselves more deliberately to the creation of a democratic, intellectually, and artistically rich community. Another motivation was the opportunity to experiment with new educational directions, with the combination of multiple perspectives inherent in the liberal arts joined to hands-on, community-based learning. Equally important was the need to minimize the impact of job loss and economic activity on the Village of Yellow Springs, as the College had been the town's largest employer. And what better way to show, as former trustee Paula Treichler reasoned, that the College did not, after all, need to be closed—"that there was sufficient money to pay the faculty, that students would find Antioch appealing, that the physical plant need not have been so fraught and immediate an issue?"<sup>13</sup>

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

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

The Institute is based in the Village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, a place with a long legacy of forward thinking, openness to diversity, and tolerance. Significant aspects of our educational curriculum are inspired by the interests and needs of the immediate community and its environment. Indeed, the curriculum of the Institute is distinctive in its historically unprecedented level of integration into, and collaboration with, the surrounding community.

Nonstop's nurturing of a relationship with the Yellow Springs community and its careful stewardship of the College in exile were designed to be a marked contrast to the University's indifference toward the historic campus and its environs. We consciously embraced the concept of a turn to the local, asking, "What would it mean to join the insights of 'relocalization' movements to the goals of a liberal arts education? How can we build upon existing local specializations and strengths, highlight and preserve local distinctiveness? What partnerships can we develop with local groups and organizations? With whom can we share facilities, spaces, and resources?"

What contributions can we make to the solving of particular local problems? What contributions can we make to the cultural and intellectual life of the area?" Our curricular directions came from necessity (our small size and shoestring budget) but were also inspired by the challenges facing Yellow Springs—an environmentally-safe power supply, clean water, smart growth without sprawl, affordable housing, the politics of food, the support needed to maintain all kinds of diversity in a small midwestern town.

The Nonstop Institute incorporated the knowledge and skills of talented local experts—particularly in the fields of environmental sustainability and the arts—inviting them to invent workshops, give presentations, and create community art projects. Our faculty, supplemented by Antioch College faculty emeriti, was able to offer a wide range of courses in familiar disciplines and areas (Beginning Chemistry, Research Methods in the Social Sciences, Anthropology of Place, Spanish, Modern Dance, Drawing, Film History, etc.) as well as weekend workshops on such varied topics as Personal Finance, The Qur'an, and the History of Jazz. In addition, we developed new interdisciplinary courses that we hoped would appeal to Yellow Springers of all ages; these included Community Economics and Environmental Sustainability; Local and Sustainable Agriculture; Queer Theory and Environmental Philosophy. Some courses focused on applied learning aimed at meeting immediate needs—in the Advanced Computer Literacy course, students and faculty worked together to produce the custom-built database that managed Nonstop's registration and evaluation system. Learning took place in countless ways outside the classroom as well, as students worked one-on-one with local artists and filmmakers, and with alumni librarians to catalog the Nonstop collection.

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

Another particularly effective Nonstop initiative was the cultural series we called "Nonstop Presents!" which we deliberately tied to the agendas of the town and to the major themes of the curriculum. Each month we produced a calendar of eclectic events—film screenings, scholarly lectures, artists' talks, performances, panels on political issues. The series showcased the abundant talents of well-known Antioch College alumni from all over the country (most of whom donated their honoraria back to Nonstop), and we again drew upon regional resources—and upon our own students. "Nonstop Presents!" was also designed to enhance certain Nonstop courses and to provide opportunities for students to exhibit and discuss their in-class projects with a wider audience. Our intent was to "give back"

to the Village through the creation of multiple public occasions for the sharing of art, ideas, and new thinking in community development. All in all, “Nonstop Presents!” hosted over 100 events and attracted over 1,400 attendees.

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

Obviously, a self-managed experimental college dedicated to localism and participatory governance required a major reorientation of faculty time commitments and forced us all to expand in new directions. Faculty work could now include such tasks as organizing alumni volunteers; participating in meetings of the Yellow Springs Village Council; negotiating zoning restrictions, building codes and liability insurance; and preparing lunch for sixty people. In retrospect, it’s hard to conceive of the faculty at a typical research university refusing to acknowledge their termination and uniting to continue the educational part of their mission outside of the ivory tower. But the high value liberal arts colleges place on collegiality and service had shaped our professional lives and identities. We were also friends and co-conspirators and had already been collaborating on committees organized to fight for the College. While we spanned generations, two-thirds of the faculty and staff who formed the backbone of the Nonstop experiment were female, a fact which may or may not be relevant; for good or for ill, women may still be more likely to perform unrecognized forms of work, to relinquish personal ambitions in support of the greater whole.

A heavy contingent of Nonstop faculty came from the arts—partly the result of chance (a high concentration of faculty in the sciences were retirement age and opted to retire), and partly perhaps because arts practitioners are all too familiar with short-term projects and irregular incomes. The presence of a number of artists in our midst helps account for our overall willingness to take risks, to live with chronic uncertainty about the immediate future, and to improvise constantly. When the residential space we had rented to house our registrar, student services, and business office proved unworkable, we immediately set about to find another. An Antioch alum who also happened to be an accomplished professional set designer directed the conversion of an old plastics factory into a new energy-efficient space we came to call “Campus North.” Dozens of us pitched in to spackle walls, paint trim, wash floors and decorate our new home. Everything produced by Nonstop had a vibrant aesthetic quality. Fall semester was launched by a parade with a marching band. Colorful pennants designed by a local artist declared that a Nonstop class or “Nonstop Presents!” event was in session, wherever it happened to be taking place. Projects in dance, photography, graphic design, and

installation art expressed our vision of community while the process of art-making, often done collectively, enacted it.

There were far too many dimensions of the Nonstop experiment to do adequate justice to them in this space (for more details, see our very informative multimedia website: <http://nonstopinstitute.org>). Nonstop's all-open-source Information Technology system, designed and implemented almost entirely by young alumni, is just one facet that deserves its own article. But it is worth noting that the creative use of internet technology was integral to our ability to build and sustain a far-flung community as well as an immediate one. List serves, a sophisticated on-line student newspaper, and the live audio and video streaming of meetings kept interested Antiochians constantly informed and engaged. With regard to teaching and course design, class websites were handy supplements to, but not substitutes for, face-to-face interaction. To explain ourselves to a wider public, we deployed multiple modes of outreach across the media spectrum; we sent email petitions, posted video on Youtube and messages on Facebook, appeared on public access TV and local television, produced pamphlets and flyers, invited newspaper reporters to our classes, made presentations at conferences, and networked with academic labor movements across the country.

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

Not surprisingly, the course of community governance "never did run smooth"—consensus-building meetings often ran overtime, and students did not always feel their contributions were valued by the faculty. The debates that developed around the question of how much tuition Nonstop students should pay, if any, led to intense discussion and eventually considerable acrimony within the community. Everyone agreed that access to knowledge and education should ideally be available to all; opinions differed as to what was practical for Nonstop Antioch to attempt. The tuition debate morphed into a split essentially about the parameters of shared governance and eventually exposed a deep fissure in the conception of

Nonstop on the part of its members. Were we, first and foremost, an educational institution, an anti-corporate movement, or an experiment in community-building? Where were the boundaries of this community, and who did it now include? How to weigh the “shares” in shared governance? Ultimately, although the Executive Collective and the faculty maintained control over the project, some Nonstoppers became disillusioned with what they perceived to be an inadequate vision of community.

Despite unresolved differences in vision, despite the instabilities that plagued the project, Nonstop Antioch’s accomplishments in the year of its existence were impressive. We kept College traditions and institutional memory alive and breathing in Yellow Springs until the College campus could be regained. Our vigilance of the College grounds quite literally protected the historic buildings when we discovered and then publicized ongoing water damage due to broken pipes. We saved a large collection of out-of-print books, rare pamphlets, and college records from extinction and catalogued them for easy accessibility. During the dark period following the College’s closure, Nonstop preserved twenty-one decent-paying full-time jobs and created a number of part-time jobs in recession-stricken southwest Ohio. Our very public refusal to cede the College’s educational legacy inspired alumni and supporters and exerted constant pressure on Antioch University to free the College.

Nonstop enrolled a total of 124 multigenerational students, including a cohort of traditional-aged students. We offered over thirty college-level courses and workshops each semester. Student evaluations of instruction collected the last week of both semesters yielded rave reviews of most of these courses and workshops. These evaluations (admittedly not necessarily indicators of academic and artistic caliber, but certainly useful information) presented glowing pictures of highly-engaged students enthusiastic about the quality of teaching they had received. Given small class sizes, students predictably described individual attention and ample guidance from faculty. More remarkable were the number of students reporting that they encountered serious, even life-changing, academic and artistic challenges. Almost across the board, students commended Nonstop classroom environments for stimulating open discussion and continuous experimentation.

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

Nonstop reminded us that the magic of learning has little to do with expensive buildings or high-tech equipment, and everything to do with dedicated teachers and passionate learners, engaged in exploration and critical inquiry. . . . Most of all, Nonstop enriched the village by inspiring us with their example of audacity, perseverance, and the glory of winning a victory for humanity.<sup>14</sup>

Nonstop’s total expenditures for the year came to \$1.4 million; however, this relatively small amount was supplemented by at least



half a million dollars' worth of in-kind contributions. Supporters from many professions offered us their services—architects, lawyers, writers, photographers, carpenters, restaurateurs and others contributed to the project. Relying on volunteerism and donations (and our own self-exploitation) was obviously a short-term survival strategy on our part. Yet, this amazing level of volunteer and discounted labor generated a sense of excitement and solidarity that proved incredibly contagious. According to Olivier De Marcellus, workplace struggles are not most fundamentally about defending jobs or wages, vital as these are; rather, they signify the deep need for acknowledgement of the social value of one's work. As such, they are calls for more dignified social relations, for "some minimal common space of liberty or autonomy." Ours was a campaign to save a threatened educational commons and to preserve it for future generations, but along the way it also became a fight to restore our professional dignity—the dignity of an eminently resourceful faculty and staff who had been discarded. And somewhere along *that* way the struggle forged an unexpected sense of collective possibility in all of us. As De Marcellus frames the question, "isn't that [broad conception of dignity] what people involved in almost every big strike or struggle usually say after winning or losing the specific battle? Isn't that what makes us all continue, generally losing year after year, but always *much* happier doing that than accepting society as it is?"<sup>15</sup>

The story of the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute has not ended with the successful purchase of Antioch College by its alumni. Nonstop no longer offers classes, but it has incorporated as a not-for-profit organization and reconfigured itself as a community arts and performance space providing diverse cultural programming in Yellow Springs. Some of us who created Nonstop have recently been hired by the Board of Trustees Pro Tempore of Antioch College. And, sadly, some have not; at the moment, the re-emerging College has made very few hires. While the campus is now secured, many of the faculty and staff that we fought so hard to keep intact have been forced to seek jobs elsewhere. The new Board and the Interim President continue to assert their commitment to tenure, a unionized staff, and fair labor practices. As of this writing it is still too early to say how concrete these assurances will turn out to be.

### Learning From Disaster

Today we are witnessing a heightened clash between the conception of higher education as a public good. While its anomalous position under the University's umbrella made our College particularly vulnerable to draconian economic measures, the impact of the corporatization of higher education has been isolating and demoralizing for many of those who work—or once worked—there. Given the current highly visible failures of neoliberalism, we now have an opportunity to interrupt the dominant logic defending the corporate university. Rather than reproducing short term, market-driven discourses, academic workers should be experimenting with a range of collective alternatives and strategies.

In our own example, Nonstop Antioch sought inspiration from the network-organization models pioneered by bioregionalist and "slow

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

The construction of new partnerships will never be sufficient to combat the numerous serious economic challenges currently facing American liberal arts colleges. Still, there remain many practical as well as environmental reasons for turning to the local. Local economies are threatened by the same forces undermining small cultural institutions of all kinds, forces that push for continual expansion and needless development; forces that tend towards the imposition of economies of scale and their accompanying homogenization; forces that undermine community self-determination, citizen participation, fair labor practices, and a reasonable quality of life for all. Nonstop's temporary experiment in community-driven education is now over, but we hope that at least some of our creative synthesis of the liberal arts and the local will live on in a newly independent Antioch College.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scott Sanders, *Antioch: An Episodic History*. Yellow Springs: Antiochiana Publishing, 2004. p. 30-33.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Heaton, "The College and the University—Financial Complexities Link Schools." *The Yellow Springs News*. June 28, 2007. For a breakdown of the faculty/adjunct ratio across the University, see Scott Jascik, "The Adjunctification of Antioch." *Inside Higher Education*. June 26, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> AAUP Report, "Antioch University and the Closing of Antioch College." *Academe: The Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors*. Nov/Dec 2009. p. 49. See also Brian Springer, "Antioch Budgets for Dummies," and "Antioch Confidential." Feb 2008. Both pieces are archived on the website The Antioch Papers. <http://theantiochpapers.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Springer, "Antioch Confidential." Feb 2008. p. 9. <http://theantiochpapers.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from President Robert Devine to Chancellor James Craiglow, Feb. 22, 1999. <http://theantiochpapers.org>

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Heaton, "The College and the University."

<sup>7</sup> Diane Chiddester, "Consultants Advise Antioch Closure." *The Yellow Springs News*. July 5, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Irwin Gottschlich. "Antioch [University] Explains Deferred Payments, Jump in Expenses." *The Dayton Daily News*. July 1 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Tullise Murdock, "Chancellor's Address to the Graduates of the Antioch University Ph.D. in Leadership and Change." Antioch University Commencement, August 11, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> "Trustees: 'Antioch College Is Up For Sale.'" no author. *The Dayton Daily News*. March 30, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> AAUP Report, "Antioch University and the Closing of Antioch College." p. 56, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanne Kay, conversations with the author.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Paula Treichler, Former Antioch University Trustee to the College Alumni Board. Private collection of the author.

<sup>14</sup> Diane Chiddester, "Nonstop Inspiration." *The Yellow Springs News*. Dec. 11, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Olivier De Marcellus, "Commons, Communities and Movements: Inside, Outside, and Against Capital." *The Commoner*. No 6. Winter 2003. p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Many thanks to all of the folks who participated in and/or supported the Nonstop Liberal Arts Institute. Special thanks to Brian Springer and Tim Noble for their advice on versions of this essay and for their dedication to the open flow of information, as demonstrated by their web archive project The Antioch Papers.