"What I've Always Dreamed a College Ought to Be"

Walter Hendricks and Biarritz American University

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One of the most unusual yet successful experiments in higher education ever attempted took place from late summer of 1945 to early spring of 1946, a period between the defeat of Nazi Germany and the founding of Marlboro College. It was a temporary university begun with good planning but scant resources, running only for three two-month-long semesters, but employing in that time close to 300 faculty and enrolling over 10,000 students. In administrative structure and curriculum it followed the standard model of an American university, but its success was the result of its uniqueness: uniformly mature and willing students, a faculty inspired by the enthusiasm of those students, and an informal approach to teaching and learning that could only have occurred with those two conditions in place. The man who would later become Marlboro's founding president would be called to teach there, and that experience would both fire his imagination and validate his emerging educational vision. If Marlboro College could be said to have an immediate educational predecessor, it was Biarritz American University.

Walter Hendricks (right) at the French Alps in 1946.

An image from a pre-World War II postcard of Biarritz, France.

IN THE EARLY FALL OF 1944, two months after President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill, the War Department issued Readjustment Regulation 1-4. Under the directive, General Eisenhower was given responsibility for insuring that, once the war ended, American servicemen in the European Theatre of Operations would have access to training and educational opportunities intended to help them readjust to peacetime. The military devised various training and educational plans throughout Europe; among them would be two provisional universities, their purpose to "provide the opportunity for university study to the personnel of the Armed Forces awaiting redeployment to the United States." One was to be on a British military base in Shrivenham, England, and the other in Biarritz, the famous resort community on France's Atlantic coast. A brigadier general was assigned as commandant of each school, and both officers were ordered to have their schools open two months after Germany's surrender. Eisenhower told the European theater commands, "The eyes of America are on this program." Despite a lack of books and other supplies, Biarritz American University began classes on August 20, 1945.

While some of the schools' instructors would be military personnel with college teaching backgrounds who were already in Europe, most would be civilian instructors drawn from the United States. By late May of 1945, an anxious recruiting staff was working from a single room at the Pentagon, making contact with colleges and universities nationwide. Walter Hendricks, at that time chair of the humanities department at Illinois Institute of Technology, received a telegram from the War Office in mid-June. In early July he left for Europe on the still-camouflaged Queen Elizabeth, which by that time had transported a million men, and then across the English Channel on a cargo ship whose big guns fired at floating mines. Arriving in France, he was awarded the assimilated rank of colonel and appointed head of BAU's English department.

Return to Table of Contents

In the Basque region of France, Biarritz was, in 1945, a town of 20,000 people, most of whom had been involved in the tourist trade up until the war. Now with hostilities ended, they were enlivened by the prospect of soldiers coming to study, and willing to help make the GI university a success. With their help, 40 hotels and 100 villas were transformed into classrooms, administrative offices and dormitories. The Casino Municipale, with its carpeted floors, high ceilings, chandeliers and enormous windows facing the Atlantic, was converted to a library complete with bookshelves built by German prisoners of war.

Most of the civilian instructors recruited from the United States were skeptical of the enterprise primarily for two reasons: First, they doubted that the military would allow them the degree of academic freedom to which they were accustomed in their home institutions; and second, they anticipated that combat-weary soldiers would make very poor students. The tired and homesick GIs asked to volunteer for study at Biarritz had their own reasons for skepticism. Every soldier knew that survival in the Army depended on avoiding volunteering for anything, no matter how good the officers made it sound. And the Army never did anything right; how could it be expected to organize and run a full-fledged university for the benefit of soldiers?

But the civilian instructors, Walter Hendricks among them, were immediately impressed by the military's openness. James Umstattd, a Biarritz instructor who documented what occurred there, wrote that, "social, economic, and political issues were discussed with no restriction except that imposed by the intellectual integrity of the professor and student." Many instructors discovered their students to be "tough-minded and realistic" and "independent in their thinking." They anticipated having to water down their courses for the soldiers, but soon realized that "the intellectual climate of the new university was, if anything, brisker than the climate of their home colleges." The students were in fact among the most serious, hard working and intellectually curious they had ever encountered; and some instructors would in later years fondly recall their time in France as the richest professional experience of their lives. In their turn, the soldiers who were to become the students happily discovered there would be no reveille, no morning calisthenics, no military dress code and little formality of any sort. WACs, officers and enlisted men sat side-by-side in classrooms. Perhaps even more impressive, the school was racially integrated three years before the rest of the U.S. military would be. No soldier had ever imagined the Army could be like this.

THE PLANNING for Biarritz American University had been, in some respects, remarkably thorough. Hervie Haufler, a private who volunteered to become a student there, reported the following:

> I arrived doubtful that the Army could create a viable university, but my cynicism was quickly routed . . . . I was overwhelmed by the completeness of the Army's planning: the great seaside hotels that had housed Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were now teeming with Yanks. Freshly painted signs on the villas indicated the courses that would be taught there—journalism in the Villa les Courlis, arts at the

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Return to Table of Contents

> Villa Rouchefoucauld, education in the Villa la Titania. I passed by the GI-operated radio station that broadcast big band music, saw the gambling casino . . . transformed into a library, and noticed the softball diamonds and football rectangles laid out on the town's outskirts. When I reported to Registration, I was amazed to find a thick catalogue that detailed 335 different study courses.

"Not only do they want a chance to prove that they can think and express their thoughts, but they want to be recognized as individuals—not just as a number of objects to be lectured to."

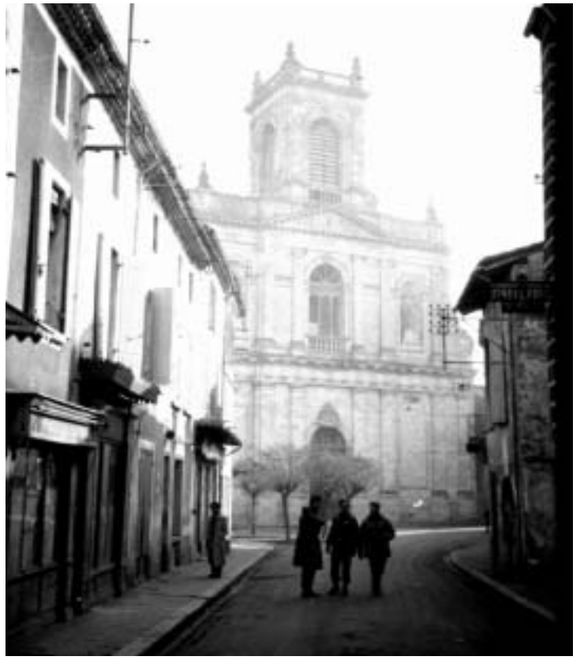
The 335 courses were distributed among eight divisions: agriculture, commerce and economics, education, engineering, fine arts, journalism, liberal arts and science and mathematics. Despite the diversity in course offerings, the approaches used to teach them would, in many instances, be similar. Teachers in engineering, as later reported by one instructor, had of necessity encouraged "complete informality in class. [The m]anner adopted was that of a group of men doing a job with the instructor as one of the men and his equal." One instructor in conversational French stated that he could allow for "[m]ore varied topics to discuss in a more adult-like manner," and another stated, "I have been on a favorable common footing with my students as soldiers, not likely to be duplicated for most teachers."

Biarritz's informal instructional practices, those involving direct student participation as opposed to the straight lecture, were categorized by Umstattd as follows: discussion, panel, forum, debate, conference and seminar. He reported that each of these was employed "to a greater extent at Biarritz than they had been by the same instructors in their home institutions, and the students felt they learned more by participating than they had previously learned in college classes through the greater use of formal methods." A strong advocate of informal practices as a result of what he observed there, Umstattd poses in his book this question: "Could it be that the general practice of student participation will gradually supplant the lecture as the typical college method of teaching?" John Grinnell, a civilian instructor and counselor at BAU, had no doubt this would happen, insisting that the overwhelming presence of mature and motivated veterans in American colleges and universities would demand pedagogical changes:

> Hourlong lectures repeating what they have read in their assignments will leave them restive and hostile. They want discussion and illustration; they want to raise questions and to have them answered. . . . Not only do they want a chance to prove that they can think and express their thoughts, but they want to be recognized as individuals—not just as a number of objects to be lectured to.

Indeed, these sorts of approaches would take hold at many institutions in the coming decade, including a new college in southern Vermont that would be incorporated eight months after Biarritz closed—a place where there would be no previous teaching methods *to* supplant; where informal approaches would be all but taken for granted. Twenty-eight years earlier, Walter Hendricks had seen Robert Frost practice informal teaching in his poetry class; at Biarritz he witnessed similar methods used across the curriculum of an entire university. BAU was, as Hendricks later put it, "unlike anything I had ever known, unless it was Robert's classes at Amherst."

Return to Table of Contents



Faculty at Biarritz were asked, at the end of the first semester, to assess the program. Most were deeply impressed by their students, saying things like, "In 15 years of teaching, the best I ever had," "I never saw a better group of students" with "a genuine hunger for intellectual activity . . ." "never encountered a more enthusiastic group of students nor . . . ever seen a group do more work on a three-semester-hour course . . . . [the students had] a proprietary interest in . . . their own learning." Biarritz and Shrivenham had, in effect, field-tested the GI Bill's viability, proving in their relatively short existences what almost no one in the Army, and certainly no civilian instructor, had foreseen. As early as the fall of 1945, Walter Hendricks would understand what would take some time for thousands of stateside professors and college administrators to realize: veterans made excellent students.

In the opinion of John Grinnell, the students' serious approach to their studies (80 percent of them had seen combat) was the direct result of what they had been through:

> They were in this war, as they put it, "up to our necks" and they did some pretty serious thinking. . . . [a]mid the haunting fears of battle, the prolonged discomforts of the advance, the endless queues in camp, the uncertainties, the red tape—they came gradually and with conviction into a new set of values. I think of Prince Andrei in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, who, wounded and lying on the grass staring up at the sky, suddenly understood how beautiful and important the sky is, and all the simple sensations of living, and how

Return to Table of Contents

> trivial were many concerns and activities he had thought important. Something like that has happened to these men. . . .

The genuine concern for the individual expressed at Biarritz was at odds with the GIs' experience of the Army up until then, and happily so, for "the disposition of the faculty to be helpful beyond the limits of the classroom and the encouraging reaction of the students created an atmosphere conducive to such techniques as coaching, tutorial assistance, clinical aid and general advising." But even with this, Umstattd tells us,

> Much of the aid given individual students was not recorded. By its nature, it could never be recorded. To have attempted a cold analysis would have killed the spirit of the odd-moment conference after class, in the classroom, in the hallways, while strolling along the street, while lounging on the beach. Whenever a student with a question saw one his teachers, he felt entirely free to ask his question. Informal chats of this type certainly ran into the thousands, and many of them resulted in lasting friendships based upon mutual intellectual interests.

DESPITE METICULOUS organization in many areas, Biarritz American University was, from its inception, faced with a dearth of supplies. Laboratory equipment for science courses, audiovisual equipment for supplemental needs, appropriate textbooks of all kinds and other necessities were largely unavailable. There were many reasons for this, but perhaps foremost among them were the War Department's reluctance to expend resources on an enterprise that could end almost any time, and Army purchasing and contracting formalities that hindered the timely acquisition of things needed immediately. Walter Hendricks, in an anecdote conveying frustration tinged with humor, reported a third reason:

> A part of the difficulty was due to the egregious and arbitrary asses who thought themselves too big for their uniforms. The climax was reached when an instructor in philosophy, sent to Paris headquarters with a sheaf of book orders, spurred by curiosity opened the envelope and read the following: "(1.) Attached requests by instructors at BAU for additional reference and textbooks are submitted for your amazement and whatever action you deem necessary or appropriate. (2.) In view of the self-induced chaotic state of books for Biarritz, it is believed that the submission of these lists will add little to the present confusion." Needless to say, when the commanding officer was made acquainted with this missive, he acted with such force and speed that the officer who wrote it must have thought a tank corps had hit him.

Despite all of these obstacles, one instructor stated, "[t]he handicap[s] [were] resolutely faced, and ingeniously met in the main . . . . It is even possible that the challenge which students and their instructors faced stimulated better learning in many cases." Walter Hendricks was one faculty member convinced of this.

Return to Table of Contents

Deprivation was, of course, something that home-front civilians had long since grown accustomed to. By the time Hendricks and his soon-to-be faculty colleagues arrived in France, they had been living with shortages—tires, gasoline, metals of all kinds—and getting by with substitutes for four long years. Over that same time, American soldiers had grown legendary for their ability to improvise. For civilians and soldiers alike, doing without and improvising were, by the summer of 1945, all but second nature, and this wartime spirit of "making do" was easily adapted to postwar life at an Army-run university. A chemistry instructor had sinks made from rough boards sealed with tar, and a Spanish instructor wrote his own textbook. A dramatics teacher who would have been well-suited to the seminal Marlboro oversaw curtains and costumes made from parachute silks, army canvas and dyed burlap. After viewing the performance, Hendricks called the costumes "among the handsomest I had ever seen."

Hugh Mulligan, Marlboro's first graduate, has admiringly called Walter Hendricks "a great scrounger," and indeed the assimilated colonel would prove a natural at making do. Wanting to give his Chaucer students a bareback feeling of what it meant to be a pilgrim, he had little trouble requisitioning donkeys, but a good deal of difficulty finding more than a single copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. He had better luck with books for his short story class. He learned of a warehouse at a quartermaster depot in Namur, Belgium, that had stockpiled 20,000 unused copies of Armed Services Editions—special editions of fiction and nonfiction ranging from *Moby Dick* to *The Art of War*. With classes beginning in two days and with few books on hand, he got the warehouse contents consigned to him, and then dispatched two soldiers to retrieve the scholastic windfall, one a lieutenant named Philip Rothman, the other an infantry replacement from the decimated 106th Division, Mulligan himself. Neither guessed at that time the degree to which their lives would be influenced by Biarritz's English department head, but in the coming weeks and months, Walter Hendricks would persuade Rothman to become a faculty member at his as-yet nonexistent college, and give Mulligan enough of a taste of the dream to eventually matriculate at Marlboro as a senior transfer.

Hugh Mulligan explained what Biarritz American University did for Walter Hendricks:

> Something about the impromptu academic life [there], the lust for learning that so many GIs exhibited after months and years of murderous war, touched him deeply. Daydreaming in the midst of his Chaucer classes, which I had never seen a professor do before, he talked about turning his . . . Vermont farm and vacation home into a small college, where students and faculty would live together as a community of scholars. . . . All of us around the English department knew by heart Hendricks's favorite quote from President James Garfield about the educator Mark Hopkins: "Give me a log hut, with only a simple bench, Mark Hopkins on one end and I on the other . . . ." It was part of the dream.

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Making do with what was available; the general absence of needless formality; the casual atmosphere in which learning could be taken seriously; the mutual respect among teachers and students; the absence of pernicious traditions such as freshmen hazing; and, perhaps

Return to Table of Contents

most importantly, the emphasis placed on the individual, coupled with the benevolent air of equality and democracy—these were hallmarks of academic life at Biarritz. To the degree that these characteristics embody the values of a free society, Biarritz was truly an *American* university.

BAU BEGAN ITS SECOND semester in mid-October of 1945, by which time Walter Hendricks had "a desk in [his] office, a table, and steel filing cabinets and a British secretary." He wrote this not to boast of the perks of a senior officer and department head, but instead to sadly concede that the thrill of the beginning was now over, that standard procedures and tame routines would define the school for the remainder of its short existence. The future founding president of Marlboro College had tasted the excitement that comes with helping to create something from nothing save commitment and resolve, and had been vitalized by it. He wanted badly to sustain the feeling, but knew that the school would be shut down in early spring. It was, after all, "only a makeshift. But what a makeshift!" he later wrote. He taught and administered there through the second semester, remained in Europe for some weeks afterward to lecture at various commands in Germany, and finally boarded a troopship home on February 1, 1946.

He thought about little else but starting a college on his Marlboro farm during the 10-day voyage to New York, recalling an overheard conversation between two soldier-students who were sitting on a Biarritz cliff and gazing thoughtfully out to sea. The words of one perfectly articulated his sentiment: "You know," he said, "this is what I've always dreamed a college ought to be." The experience of Biarritz was indeed a dream realized for Walter Hendricks, for in those influential months the idea of starting a college had evolved from possibility to certainty. When he carried his service trunk down the gangplank at a dock in Brooklyn, there was no question in his mind that there would soon be another school—in all of its intangible essentials very much like Biarritz—on a hill farm in Vermont.

Photos courtesy of Hildamarie Hendricks

NOTES: Page 1: J.G. Umstattd and colleagues at BAU, *B.A.U. in Action: Teaching and Learning at Biarritz American University* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1947), 8. General Eisenhower to Major Commands, 17 July 1945, in USFET SGS 353. Walter Hendricks, unpublished autobiography, 325, courtesy Geoffrey Hendricks and Hildamarie Hendricks. Page 2: Umstattd, iv., John Erle Grinnell, "When the GI Goes to College: Experiences in an Overseas University Center," *The Journal of Higher Education: Vol. 17, No. 5* (May 1946), 243. Hervie Haufler, "The Most Contented GIs in Europe," *American History* (October, 1999), 6. http://www.thehistorynet.com/AmericanHistory/articles/1999/1099 text.htm. Haufler, 4. Page 3: Umstattd, 14, 49, 80. Grinnell, 245. Hendricks, autobiography, 358. Page 4: Umstattd, 15, 66. Haufler, 7. Grinnell, 244. Umstattd, 81. Page 5: Umstattd, 138. Walter Hendricks, "Bivouac at Biarritz," *Illinois Tech Engineer* (March 1948) 3 (reprint), Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. Umstattd, 138. Walter Hendricks, "Marlboro College," *Amherst Graduates' Quarterly: Vol. XXXVII* (May 1948) no. 3, 181, Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library. Conversation with Hugh Mulligan, Marlboro, VT, September 13, 2003. Hendricks autobiography, 332. Telephone conversation with Hugh Mulligan, October 5, 2002. Page 6: Hugh Mulligan, "I Remember Walter," *Potash Hill* (Marlboro College, Marlboro, VT, Spring 1980) 4. Hendricks autobiography, 338, 358, Hendricks, "Bivouac at Biarritz," 4.

Return to Table of Contents