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.
In the early fall of 1944, two months after President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill, the War Department issued Reorganization 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 Allied Forces awaiting redeployment to the United States.”

One was to be on a British military base in Shivenham, 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 commanders, “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 school’s 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 assistant rank of colonel and appointed head of BAU’s English department.

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.”

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 Municipal, 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 officer 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 Urmstawit, 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 vowed 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 rote, no morning calisthenics, no military dress code and little formality of any sort. WAACs 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.
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.

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 major] 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.

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 Shriverham 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 state-side 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 ...” (amid) 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...
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, medals 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 made 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 overview curtains and costumes made from parachute slacks, 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 requisitioning. As 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 . . . .’ 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 moment; it was not an academic conference after all, in the classroom, in the hallways, while strolling along the esplanade, while lounging on the beach. Whenever a student with a question saw one of 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 classes, 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 ways in which the Army purchased things. The climactic instance was when an instructor in philosophy sent to Paris headquarters with a sheaf of book orders, spurned by curiosity opened the envelope and read the following: "(1) Attached request by instructors at BAU for additional reference and textbooks are submitted for your attention 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 commandeering officer was made acquainted with this misdeed, 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, ‘[The handicaps] were ridiculous, and incredibly 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.

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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 junior officer and department head, but rather to softly convey that the thrill of the beginning was now over, that standard procedures and same 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 gang-plank at a dock in Brooklyn, there was no question in his mind that there would soon be another school—in all of its intangible essences very much like Biarritz—on a hill farm in Vermont.


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**Taste the Olives**

Joseph Mazur

Euclid in the Rainforest, by longtime Marlboro professor Joe Mazur, hit the bookstores last fall to popular and critical acclaim that has surprised no one so much as the author. Noted Harvard physicist and author Peter Galison called the collection of essays about logic and math “delightful… a picaresque novel of mathematics” and Amazon.com placed it on its list of “the newest and coolest products our customers are buying.” Here is an excerpt.

**POSEIDON’S FRESH BREATH** might have filled the sails of a thousand ships to enrich Aegean history, but color is what gives that ocean its matchless character, the blue of sapphire. There is where porpoises play, under skies swept clear by easterly winds flowing down from Russia, in their own celestial galaxy of white footsteps on blue waters. I was there long ago, when few Greek islands had airports, and ferries followed zigzagging routes and wildly broken schedules. Ancient Greeks must have been puzzled when they first encountered infinity in the fifth century B.C. My first deep musings on the subject came while sailing in the vicinity of Pythagoras’s birthplace. The year was 1963.

With no particular destination in mind, I boarded the first ferry leaving Piraeus. It made an odyssey northward against the Meltimi, stopping at Salonika, then Alexandroupolis, and finally Lemnos, an island on the way to nowhere in the northern Aegean, keeping the magnificent Mount Athos within sight just until the Turkish Mount Ida could take over. Off the main shipping route with no airport, Lemnos had few visitors, except for the occasional cruise ship or rich American who came by yacht. This was the home of Hephaestus, god of the anvil, and the island where, according to myth, women killed their husbands’ Jason and the Argonauts found it to be a paradise of solitary women. So did I.

From my hotel at the port of Castro, I noticed an attractive foreign girl walking in the marketplace from stall to stall buying fresh figs and olives, swinging her net bag and flirting with vendors to bargain. She was grinning when she rested for a moment cross-legged at a capstan on the quay. With gathering courage, I dared to speak to her as she rested for a moment cross-legged at a capstan on the quay.