

A Small-College Aura for Large Institutions

By Donald N. McCloskey

ATTENDING a big state university is exciting but terrifying for many students. One way to ease their fear of finding themselves alone among so many strangers is to bring social groups and teaching together—have students form groups that attend some general-education classes together for the first couple of years.

That's the proposal in a nutshell. It would cost nothing, affect no curricula, and make advising easier. Simply assign 80 freshmen to Group 1, say; all 80 students would take courses together in rhetoric and college mathematics in their first year, for example, and Western civilization and literature in their second. Other groups could have science or social-science emphases, but it would be important not to group together all the future engineers or pre-business students or political scientists, since breadth of association has its own pedagogic virtues. Students could choose the rest of their courses as they do now, as individuals—and strangers.

A more radical version of the proposal, which wouldn't cost anything either, would be for the groups to live together in the same dormitories—co-ed or single-sex. Our registrar at Iowa says any version of the proposal would require only a key stroke on a computer. A costlier version would be to provide teaching tailored for each group; professors teaching courses attended by a group could coordinate their material so that concepts presented in one course would be applied in the other courses in different disciplines. But the core of the proposal is simply to have a group of students go to some classes together.

Students can create a social life for themselves faster in a small group than they can as strangers in a class of 400. They soon go to classes as friends. Further, they begin to do intellectual work in common; they study together, they complain about courses together, they end up thinking about what they've learned together. The

class becomes a continuation of a conversation with friends earlier that day.

Going to class together creates for a big state university some of the advantages students have at a small college. True, a big university can't provide the same intimate atmosphere a smaller college can. We can't offer tiny freshman seminars and a free computer to every student. We can't provide spacious dorm rooms. But there's no reason that we can't provide the unifying social and intellectual life that students automatically get in small colleges. We can create 30 or 40 small colleges out of one immense one, at no additional cost.

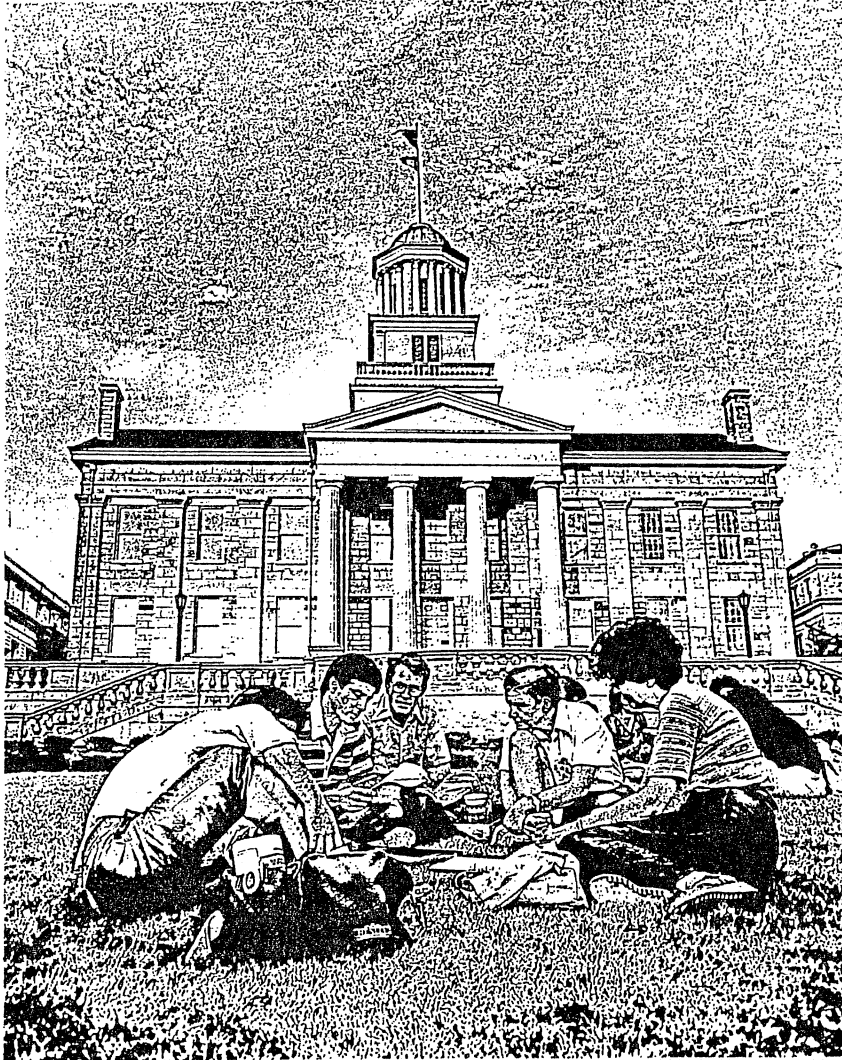
SUCH A SCHEME is not complicated, goes no oxen, upsets no apple carts. It doesn't even change, at least initially, what goes on in the classroom, although teachers of the same groups eventually might decide they'd like to talk to each other and perhaps emphasize common concepts. Attending classes in groups would give students more voice in their educations: A group of 80 acquaintances sore at a professor who doesn't show up for class or who doesn't grade

exams on time is more potent than 80 unconnected strangers.

The proposal has been tried at the University of Iowa for the past several years. Each year a couple of groups of 80 students have been formed; members then attend some classes together for two years. This fall the plan was expanded and 355 incoming freshmen chose to participate, about 12 per cent of the first-year class.

The idea works. It was developed initially by David Schoenbaum, a professor of history, and refined by Miriam Gilbert, an English professor, and Philip Kutzko, a mathematics professor, with the help of other faculty members. Students in the program are lively, interactive, honest. They watch out for each other. Attendance is better than in similar classes of strangers, faculty members report, and discussions are easier to sustain. Faculty members say that such classes keep them on their toes, because the students act as unified groups, not the herds we are accustomed to lecturing at.

To form, say, 10 groups of 80 students, a registrar could identify the 10 most common patterns of courses students take in



TOM JURGENSTIN, THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

their first two years. Three or four groups might be formed around the most common patterns. The groups might even be called "demes" in honor of the subdivisions of the Athenian electorate. There is no need to force anyone to do anything: Just offer the "demes" to incoming freshmen and explain what they are.

The first 800 who want to sign up get in. They won't have to take any courses they wouldn't eventually enroll in anyway. Students would have more incentive to stick with a course they started with. They could drop out of the group if they found they preferred anonymity, as some do.

FOR the radical version of the plan, the housing office would assign people in the same demes to the same dorms, as it already does members of the football team.

If the groups proved popular, they could be expanded until as many students who wanted to could join. If they were unpopular, the program could die at no cost. (Name another academic program with such sweet sunset properties.) If the groups were successful, the college might be pressed to make them intellectually coherent by coordinating and integrating their courses. This would be beneficial; we think a lot about majors, but many institutions haven't done much to provide intellectual coherence in general education.

If the demes worked, they might also override the attraction of other social groups, such as the ones in which students go drinking.

So that's the idea. No millions from foundations, no administrative careers made. Just help students form groups based on common educational purposes. Isn't it time universities helped American students use their formidable social skills for something more worthwhile than partying?

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