

= University of Wisconsin Experimental College =

The University of Wisconsin Experimental College was a two @-@ year college designed and led by Alexander Meiklejohn inside the University of Wisconsin ? Madison with a great books , liberal arts curriculum . It was established in 1927 and closed in 1932 . Meiklejohn proposed the idea for an alternative college in a 1925 Century magazine article . The magazine 's editor @-@ in @-@ chief , Glenn Frank , became the University of Wisconsin 's president and invited Meiklejohn to begin the college within the university . Despite pushback from the faculty , the college opened in the fall of 1927 with a self @-@ governing community of 119 students and less than a dozen faculty . Students followed a uniform curriculum : Periclean Athens for freshmen and modern America for sophomores . The program sought to teach democracy and to foster an intrinsic love of learning within its students .

The college 's students became known as free spirited outsiders within the university for their different dress , apathetic demeanor , and greater interest in reading books . The college 's demographics were unlike the rest of the university , with students largely not from Wisconsin and disproportionately of Jewish and East Coast families . The college developed a reputation for radicalism and wanton anarchy , especially within Wisconsin . The students lived and worked with their teachers , called advisers , in Adams Hall , away from the heart of the university . They had no fixed schedule , no compulsory lessons , and no semesterly grades , though they read from a common syllabus . The advisers taught primarily through tutorial instead of lectures . Extracurricular groups , including philosophy , law , and theater clubs , were entirely student @-@ led .

The Great Depression and lack of outreach to Wisconsinites and UW faculty led to the college 's slow decline . Enrollment decreased every year since the program began , which its statewide reputation exacerbated . After his son was expelled in 1931 by dean and Experimental College critic George Sellery , Meiklejohn recommended the college 's dissolution . Public criticism of the college included student radicalism , lack of discipline , administrative issues , and financial issues . Meiklejohn wrote a retrospective of the college , which philosopher John Dewey reviewed favorably and noted for its contribution to educational philosophy . University of Wisconsin faculty and regents voted to dissolve the college in May 1932 . Some advisers stayed to teach in the university , and Meiklejohn remained briefly before moving to Berkeley . The Experimental College influenced programs internal to the university , and was the precursor to its Integrated Liberal Studies undergraduate program .

= = Background = =

In June 1923 , Alexander Meiklejohn had been asked to step down as president of Amherst College . He was recruited specifically to revitalize the college a decade earlier with the views on education for which he was known . Meiklejohn announced curriculum reform with a singular focus on " understanding human life as to be ready and equipped for the practice of it " , and subsequently made the humanities coursework more interdisciplinary , added social sciences courses , and attracted new faculty members interested in the Socratic method . Meiklejohn had student support , but clashed with senior faculty and alumni , and was ultimately removed due to his administrative mismanagement and not his educational reforms .

Meiklejohn resolved to open a new , experimental liberal arts college in late 1924 , but struggled to find funding . Seeking \$ 3 million for the venture , he was rejected by Bernard Baruch and Abraham Flexner but through support from The New Republic 's Herbert Croly was offered planning funds from the magazine 's main benefactor . The planning team included journalist Mark Sullivan , New School professor Alvin Johnson , and The Century Magazine editor @-@ in @-@ chief Glenn Frank . Frank had previously published Meiklejohn 's work and was sympathetic to his cause .

In January 1925 , Century published Meiklejohn 's plan for a new and " experimental " college , " A New College : Notes on a Next Step in Higher Education " . The proposed college would have a " unified " two @-@ year curriculum and closer ties between faculty and students , who were to be " coequal partners " . Meiklejohn called for a small school with a maximum of 35 professors and 300

students , with tutorial as the chief means of instruction . The planned program eschewed division by academic discipline and preferred holistic study of human civilization , particularly ancient Athens and the contemporary United States . The school sought to foster students who understood themselves in the context of their surrounding society as a " total human undertaking " . Meiklejohn wanted students who would independently volunteer to live in self @-@ governance . Meiklejohn biographer Adam Nelson wrote that for the 1920s , this idea of voluntary interest in study " seemed almost laughable " . The augmented liberal arts program was a departure from vocational education trends of the time , as was its emphasis on smaller classes in a time of large lectures for burgeoning college populations .

Frank stepped down from the magazine in May 1925 to become the incoming president of the University of Wisconsin ( UW ) . He invited Meiklejohn to open his school there and offered him a distinguished professorship . Meiklejohn planned the experimental college in secret and moved to Madison in January 1926 to teach in the philosophy department . Meiklejohn finished his experimental college proposal by April 1926 . It was similar in style to his Century article and became codified as the Experimental College based on its colloquial reference in correspondence between Meiklejohn and Frank . Meiklejohn presented his proposal to the All @-@ University Study Commission convened by Frank " to investigate the first two years of liberal college work " . The university faculty received the proposal apprehensively , and criticized its vagueness , lack of control group , costliness , and effect on their livelihoods . It was eventually approved on the condition that the faculty could review its details and regular progress . The Wisconsin legislature approved two years of funding , and the Experimental College was scheduled to open in fall 1927 .

Meiklejohn prioritized compatibility in his staff selection , and so hired ten of his friends who could work in " intimate fellowship " . The college received hundreds of faculty applications in the summer of 1926 , and the final makeup included six from Amherst , two from Brown , and one from Scotland , mostly in idealist philosophy and labor economics disciplines . The team met through the winter and into the 1927 spring to plan the program . They received 119 applications even though the program was unadvertised . Half of the applicant pool was interested in working with Meiklejohn specifically , and he was excited to work with " an entirely self @-@ selected and therefore truly democratic community of learning . "

= = Program = =

Meiklejohn 's Experimental College proposal called for two years of compulsory and interdisciplinary study of civilizations : ancient Athens for freshmen , and contemporary America for sophomores . The plan had students and teachers living and working together in the same residence hall with no fixed schedule , no compulsory lessons , and no semester grades , but a common syllabus . Their only grade was to be the single final exam . The college aimed " to inspire students to want to learn " and to teach democracy through " the intrinsic value of learning " over bribery , coercion , and physical violence .

The teachers , called advisers , would instruct via small , weekly tutorials and occasional schoolwide lectures on their personal research . Adviser appointments were split with two @-@ thirds in the Experimental College and one @-@ third in the rest of the university , a compromise between Meiklejohn and the College of Letters and Sciences . The program 's budget and appointments were negotiated directly with President Frank , bypassing the UW College of Letters and Science and its dean , George Sellery .

Meiklejohn saw books as the main instrument of a liberal education , and chose a great books curriculum so as to model the human intellect he wished to impart and to connect the timeless philosophical questions that occupy all such works . He wanted his college to read the same books and to debate the same questions simultaneously . Meiklejohn did not prefer one " great book " over another and saw them as interchangeable and in pursuit of the same essential questions about goodness , justice , and truth . Freshmen studied ancient Athens in the age of Pericles , reading authors such as Aeschylus , Herodotus , Homer , Plato , Thucydides , and Xenophon . Meiklejohn 's curriculum accentuated the author 's thoughts behind the work as related to general questions about

society , and forewent emphasis on the texts themselves .

Plato 's The Republic was the freshman year capstone , as " the apex of literary and philosophical achievement in ancient Athenian thought " and the book that best embodied their civilization . Meiklejohn asked the students to synthesize how the contents of their first year were " interrelated in the experience of the individuals and of the community as a whole " . Over the summers , Meiklejohn assigned Middletown studies where students drew conclusions about American society based a view of their hometowns as typical of society . The returning sophomores were expected to exhibit self @-@ regulation as the primary regulator of their understanding , to educate themselves self @-@ sufficiently , and to wean themselves of the college institution . This freedom was taught so as to empower students towards independence while the advisers continued to hold pedagogical power . Henry Adams 's The Education of Henry Adams was the sophomore year capstone , chosen for its complexity , self @-@ criticism , and study of modern America 's development . Meiklejohn biographer Adam Nelson compared the Ex College curriculum and Adams 's autobiography as both lamenting " the tragedy of lost spiritual and intellectual unity " and enabling students to relate " their literary and lived experiences " .

= = = Extracurriculars = = =

All extracurricular groups were student @-@ led . Clubs included the Philosophy Club ( held weekly at Meiklejohn 's house ) , the Law Group , the Forum , and the Experimental College Players ( a theater troupe ) . The Philosophy Club discussed topics such as the self and the relation between philosophy and science , for which Meiklejohn invited Clarence Ayres from Amherst to speak . The Law Group discussed liberty , state action , and laissez @-@ faire , while the Forum discussed current events like war , behaviorism , and imperialism . The Players performed classical plays including Antigone , The Clouds , Euripedes 's Electra , and Lysistrata , which caused a particular stir for its cross @-@ gender acting in erotic scenes . The English department chair and dean of women both castigated President Frank for letting the play run . Meiklejohn also invited several prominent speakers , including Bertrand Russell , Clarence Darrow , Frank Lloyd Wright , and Lewis Mumford .

= = = Facilities = = =

The College was based in Adams Hall , where students and their advisers lived and worked by the shore of Lake Mendota ( except for Meiklejohn , who lived in a large house several blocks away ) . Adams Hall was constructed in 1926 , with a Renaissance @-@ style quad and eight identical divisions , each with its own common room , den , and facilities for 30 students , two advisers , and a fellow . The surrounding facilities afforded abundant sporting opportunities , and the site offered distance from the city and university . The students shared part of Adams Hall with non @-@ Experimental College students , and the nearby common dining hall with the UW students in Tripp Hall . The other students were said to be bothered by the Experimental College 's disregard for property , rambunctiousness , noise , and dining hall biscuit fights .

= = Rise = =

The first class arrived in fall 1927 . The incoming Experimental College class was more diverse than the larger university 's population . One third of students hailed from Wisconsin ( as opposed to 90 percent in the university ) , most were from urban areas ( the East Coast had particularly strong representation ) , one third were second @-@ generation immigrants , and Meiklejohn estimated their Jewish population at 40 percent . The College was all @-@ male , due in part to space availability and the regents ' refusal of mixed @-@ sex living arrangements , in keeping with American college conventions . The students were largely well @-@ versed in current affairs , with higher scores on entrance exams and lower high school grades than their UW counterparts . Meiklejohn appreciated the challenges of reconciling this diversity and related this task to those

facing the country 's democratic governance .

Meiklejohn recommended student government to the fall 1927 class , but they couldn 't decide on its form and ultimately voted against government . Put another way , they democratically voted against democratic governance in favor of anarchy . This disappointed Meiklejohn , but he thought they would eventually change their minds .

As freshmen struggled with the Athenian curriculum , he reverted to classification by academic discipline and offered companion texts in the field of the current work studied . In their dorms , the college students were known for their lack of respect for property , with three times the breakage in dorm assets than the rest of the university . Meiklejohn saw this as desirable and indicative of abetting nonconformity , and did not attempt to curb it . Meiklejohn had full reign over the college , so the university and its disciplinary proceedings could not intervene . Upon their exit two years later , students transferred to a number of Ivy League and prominent state universities . By this time , the college was known throughout the nation and Europe .

The college was reputed to be a radical institution . A judge presiding over a case involving three students in a socialist march declared the school " a hotbed of radical activity " . Meiklejohn bemoaned this characterization of his school and blamed the college 's media prominence for disproportionate coverage of an avant @-@ garde minority . Two such cases included a former student who announced his Communist Party gubernatorial bid from jail , and another who organized a labor march with the college 's students that ended in a face @-@ off described as " bearded ' Experimenters ' " against varsity athletes " bent on ' smashing the heads of the Reds ' " . The Experimental College students acted differently from those of the rest of the university . They grew beards , wore their hair long , carried an air of apathy conspicuously , and did not tend as meticulously to their outward presentation . They developed a tradition of wearing dark blue blazers with pearl gray trim , emblazoned with the owl of Athena , worn in the " spirit of fellowship " and to set the college apart from the university . Many of the advisers ( including Meiklejohn ) were indeed progressive @-@ minded activists .

Despite their stereotypical " queerness " , The Daily Cardinal reported in 1930 that a majority of Experimental College students participated in sport , and that a number joined intramural teams , pledged for Greek life , and joined campus clubs . However , the students abnormally read an average of 16 non @-@ assigned books each semester and had an average of " only two dates a month " , which the paper considered abnormal amid hints of homosexuality . As these claims became widespread , Meiklejohn imported psychiatrist Frankwood Williams from New York to study the students ' sexual habits . He found the students to be " warped and twisted " as " normal for ... their age " , praised the program for aiding their psychosexual growth where others inhibit , and concluded that the advisers made the students subservient to their demands even as they spoke in praise of student autonomy .

= = Decline = =

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 , the Experimental College began a slow decline . Many students couldn 't afford tuition , fewer had additional savings , and several dropped out . Along with books and campus salaries , the Experimental College became a budgetary luxury during a time of economic need for both students and the state , and its funding was in jeopardy . Meiklejohn started an Experimental College interest @-@ fee loan fund for unfunded students , and asked advisers and monied students to donate . During this period , some sophomores absconded the college for two weeks to live like the vagrant hobos who traveled the Midwest by rail looking for work . They returned to write papers about their experiences , which Meiklejohn is said to have appreciated for its syncretism of experience and the great questions grounded in their readings .

A 1930 faculty review of the curriculum questioned the program 's focus and choice of civilizations . The advisers entertained the Enlightenment , Middle Ages , and Renaissance as alternatives to their ancient Athens curriculum , but ultimately did not change course . By early 1930 , Meiklejohn began to show a loss of faith in the experiment and in education reform , chiefly in the ability to teach " rational self @-@ criticism " . Around the same time , Meiklejohn received letters from the Baraboo ,

Wisconsin , schools superintendent and a Baraboo judge noting the Experimental College 's sordid reputation in the state and its habit of repelling " ordinary " students whose parents were uninterested in the ramifications of such an education . Within the community , a January 1930 student committee reported a widespread lack of individual responsibility in their living arrangements . Parents began to complain about the college 's public esteem , the qualities forming in their sons , and the curriculum . The experiment was in ill repute .

Enrollment dropped every year since the program 's inception such that , when compounded by dropouts , the program was below half @-@ capacity three years later . UW President Glenn Frank had warned of decreased enrollment in August 1928 and of its consequences for the college . UW College of Letters and Science Dean George Sellery offered support conditional on codified discipline and uniform final exams , which Meiklejohn refused . Sellery later refused to allow transfer students into the college . Meiklejohn wrote letters to Wisconsin high schools in April 1929 that acknowledged the college 's stereotypes and welcomed demographic change , but the campaign backfired . He sent an adviser to tour the state and solve what he saw as a communication issue . The adviser found high school seniors largely interested in vocational training , and that the prospect of traditional college excited students to the point where they did not consider improvements upon that model . The adviser found students uninterested in the Experimental College 's prospects .

The locals saw Meiklejohn as an outsider . He was foreign to Madison in his politics , social life , and personality . Dean Sellery and President Frank 's professional relationship was untrusting and contemptuous , which extended to Meiklejohn due to his close association with Frank . Sellery had the support of the faculty , who were envious of the Experimental College advisers ' arrangements for higher salaries . In objection to the college 's reputation for radicalism , the son of the man who endowed Meiklejohn 's professorship revoked his funding . Frank needed the donor 's support , and so the incident marked Frank 's waning support for the college . Sellery spoke out against the Experimental College in the first quarter of 1929 , and Frank attempted to fire him in response . In 1931 , Sellery received letters from spies who found Meiklejohn 's son Donald , a philosophy doctoral student at the university and a part @-@ time Experimental College adviser , engaged in sex acts against university policy . Sellery pursued expulsion and denied Meiklejohn and his son 's separate requests for a lesser punishment . A week later , Meiklejohn asked the advisers to close the college .

Common public explanations for the college 's closure include student radicalism , lack of discipline , administrative issues , and financial issues . The Nation 's Eliseo Vivas blamed its lack of grades as detrimental to student incentive , and judged the effort to create self @-@ motivated students through freedom to be a failure . In School and Society , Professor Grant Showerman also credited the college 's freedoms and lack of compulsions with its demise . Proponents of the Experimental College painted it as the foil of a conservative , standard college , and blamed educational stagnation on the existing order . Meiklejohn believed in a liberal education 's power to change society through imagining alternatives to the status quo . He aimed to produce students who could counterbalance society with independence of thought , but admitted that he did not know how to facilitate this .

The University of Wisconsin faculty and regents voted to end the Experimental College in May 1932 . There was a farewell banquet for 250 guests in June 1932 . Meiklejohn did not judge the college 's success by its permanence , which he did not expect ? he said he attempted the college as a test . Meiklejohn asked Sellery to give his graduate student advisers university assistantships , but was denied . Meiklejohn began to work on adult education in the University of Wisconsin Extension Division in July 1932 , where some of the Experimental College 's ideas took hold . He later moved to Berkeley . Advisers who stayed after the program 's end ? such as classicist Walter Agard , philosopher Carl Bögholt , and political scientist John Gaus ? were known as popular and innovative , and Agard became the Classics department chair .

= = Legacy = =

Meiklejohn wrote a retrospective of the Experimental College during the first half of 1932 . John

Dewey reviewed the published book and declared it " a contribution to the philosophy of American education " . He saw the college to be a true expression of liberal education as it fostered rational faculties and self @-@ criticism , and noted the college 's place in fighting norms on a much larger timescale . For its ability to produce free @-@ thinkers in an age without similar values , Dewey found the college " a tragic success " .

Experimental College alumni celebrated reunions in 1942 at the University of Chicago , in 1957 at St. John 's College in Annapolis , Maryland , and in 1962 back in Madison . At St. John 's , Meiklejohn addressed the audience and read his favorite poets . Over a hundred alumni announced a fund for the Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom through the American Association of University Professors . At the Madison reunion , alumni announced the Alexander Meiklejohn Lectureship on the Meaning and Methods of Education for Freedom . Their reunions featured notably intellectual speakers , and would take on the air of their college discussions . Over the next two decades , Meiklejohn would return to speak in Madison at the behest of the Memorial Union Forum Committee and philosophy department .

In *The University of Wisconsin : A Pictorial History* , Arthur Hove states that the Experimental College " had little discernible influence beyond the university " , though it served as a prototype for the university 's Integrated Liberal Studies ( ILS ) program , spawned interest in learning , and showed the university 's role in making individuals as well as workers . Cronon and Jenkins ' *The University of Wisconsin : A History , 1925 ? 1945* notes the college 's recognition as the " best known example of [ Wisconsin ] curricular innovation " at the time , and blamed the college 's closure on the depression but more so " the hubris of its architects " for not evangelizing its value to Wisconsinites and UW faculty . Cronon and Jenkins also saw the college 's influence in Charles Russell Bardeen 's fourth @-@ year medical school preceptor program , the academic recommendations from the 1930 Fish and 1940 Daniels Committees , and the inception of Integrated Liberal Studies . Similar to the Experimental College , the Integrated Liberal Studies started in the late 1940s was a great books , liberal arts , tutorial curriculum . It was developed in part by Agard , the Classics professor and former Experimental College adviser . An English professor described ILS 's ambience as that of a " small college " within a large university . Meiklejohn received an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Madison in June 1964 , where he was escorted by the first ILS director , Robert Pooley .

A 1939 announcement described him as " one of the university 's greatest teachers " . Notable alumni include Victor Wolfson , a Broadway playwright and founder of the college 's theater group .