An Unknown Quantity
Olin College students, faculty and administrators create an innovative new university from scratch

By Jon Marcus

NEEDHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

THE STUDENTS MINGLE shyly, carefully turned out to look as if they don’t care how they look. Their parents, anxious to appear as if they aren’t watching, stare like hawks. The administrators smile and make speeches in the shade of a yellow-and-white-striped tent, where there is a buffet with tofu burgers for the vegetarians. “This is the first day of an extraordinary journey,” one reads from his notes. It is, in short, a typical opening of the academic year at a small New England college.

But this particular small college is far from typical, and these are not typical students, and this is not just another academic year. It is the first day not only of an extraordinary journey, but of an audacious and staggeringly expensive experiment: the creation of the first new freestanding undergraduate engineering college in the United States in nearly a century, and one of the few new private U.S. universities of any kind in decades.

Beyond the yellow-and-white-striped tent, construction crews are scrambling to finish the modular buildings that will temporarily house the faculty and these first 30 students until work is completed on the campus, which so far consists mainly of steel beams sprouting from a suburban Boston hillside. This opening day begins a year of collaboration between students, faculty and administrators to achieve the singular goal of starting a brand-new university from scratch.

When finished, these buildings will stand as a physical symbol, an implicit rebuke of the way higher education is provided in America today—and of the snail’s pace at which it seems able to change. Paid for by what could ultimately amount to the entire financial assets of the Franklin W. Olin Foundation, Olin College is meant not only to hasten the laggard reform of engineering education, but also challenges many long-held practices of traditional higher education in general.

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Pushing Advanced Placement
California hopes to include more minority students

By Kay Mills

MOJAVE, CALIFORNIA

VERONICA GOMEZ hated reading, she says, but “started to like it” because of the Advanced Placement literature and composition class that she is taking as a senior at Mojave High School. She explains that reading was hard for her because she didn’t understand why writers were saying what they were saying. The AP class guides her through Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night,” Charlotte Bronte’s “Jane Eyre,” and Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” her favorite. This is only the second year that her school has offered AP English.

Mojave, with 500 students in a small, wind-swept town in the high desert northeast of Los Angeles, and Gomez, the daughter of Mexican immigrants who work in local fast food restaurants, epitomize what the creators of the state’s AP challenge grant may have had in mind when they established the program to increase opportunity for students to take more rigorous college preparatory courses. State Senator Martha Escutia (D-Montebello) sponsored the legislation, part of Governor Gray Davis’ budget, enacted two years ago to increase both the number of Advanced Placement courses in California high schools and the number of students enrolling in them.

California was also reacting to an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit charging that minority students often lacked access to these courses. The state spent $16.5 million in the first year of the program, and budgeted $12.375 million for this school year because the size of the grants decreases each year.

The challenge grant program is “important because the state has a constitutional obligation to provide all students access to what is required for them to have a reasonable opportunity to compete,” said Jeannie Oakes, professor of education at UCLA and a member of the program’s state advisory board. The University of California, for example, gives AP courses extra weight when calculating applicants’ grade point averages so a student who received an A gets five points instead of the usual four. Thus, as matters stand today, “AP is the gold standard for education,” Oakes said, and “a family or a student shouldn’t have to go to heroic measures to get access to the courses.”

Ideally, Advanced Placement courses provide challenges for bright high school students who might otherwise be bored. Increasingly, students take the AP courses and exams to improve their chances to win admission to top-rated colleges. In 1988, 39,040 California public high school students took AP exams. By 2001, that number had increased to 49,618, and the number of students taking AP exams in California is currently the third largest in the nation.

In This Issue

Daniel Habuki is president of Soka University, a new Buddhist liberal arts college in Orange County, California, with a $245 million campus and a $300 million endowment. (See Page 9.)
EDITORIAL

Losing Ground

Tuition increases outpace family income

As this issue of National CrossTalk goes to press, we are about to release Losing Ground, a national status report on the affordability of higher education. Because of the financial problems most states are experiencing this year, Losing Ground deals primarily with public two- and four-year colleges and universities. In it, we identify five trends for special attention by policy makers in 2002:

- We measure “affordability” by the share of annual family income required to pay for a year of college tuition. By this measure, college has become less affordable over recent years—only among the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans has family income kept pace with tuition increases. Over the past decade, tuition rose faster than median family income at four-year public colleges and universities in 41 states, and at two-year colleges in 36 states.
- State and federal student aid grants have increased, but these increases have not kept pace with rising tuition.
- In 1986, more students of all income levels borrowed more to pay for college. Fewer low-income students attend college, and when they do enroll, borrow more in relation to their income.
- For two decades, the largest tuition increases have been imposed in times of economic recessions, and state and institutional financial problems are disproportionately passed along to students in the form of precipitous tuition increases. This pattern is emerging once again in the current recession.
- Despite several difficult budget years, particularly during the recessions of the early 1980s and the early 1990s, state appropriations for higher education have increased by 13 percent over the past 20 years, even after taking inflation and enrollment growth into account.

Of course, not every state reflects these national trends. In most states, however, tuition has increased faster than inflation, faster than family income and faster than enrollments. For all but the most affluent families, tuition represents an ever-increasing proportion of income.

One consequence, particularly in the 1990s, has been a clarror for relief from middle and upper income Americans who are going to college, and when they do enroll, rely more on loans, and stimulated new claims for governmental relief from middle-income families. If there were ever any general consensus about how responsibility for paying for college should be shared, no trace of it can be found in 2002. As D. Bruce Johnstone observes, “Whatever the causes, the fabric of the American ‘system’ of financial assistance and tuition policy seems to be unraveling.”

In most states, tuition has increased faster than inflation, faster than family income and faster than enrollments. For all but the most affluent families, tuition represents an ever-increasing proportion of income.

by student financial assistance is the reality of institutional costs—that is, the institutional cost per student of providing a year of college. This cost has grown from $10,265 in 1980 to $14,582 in 1998 (the latest year for which national information is available). This is a 41 percent increase in constant dollars. During this period, state appropriations grew by 13 percent while tuition and fees—the price students and families are asked to pay—rose by 107 percent. (See chart.)

The experience of the past two decades suggests, then, that the heart of the affordability issue is not, as many would have it, reduced state support of higher education. In the aggregate, states increased their financial support. The real problem is that the institutional costs of providing higher education have gone up faster than states were willing or able to finance. Students and families have paid much of this increase in institutional costs, and tuition became the fastest growing source of revenue for public colleges and universities. Hence the erosion of affordability for most American families.

Another conclusion we draw from recent history is that need-based student financial assistance will remain in jeopardy if tuition continues to command ever-larger shares of family income. We believe it unlikely that student financial assistance will catch up with need if the prices of higher education persist in their upward spiral at the rates of the past 20 years. Public subsidies are not concentrated on the most needy, as advocates of “high-tuition/high-aid” policies assume; rather, higher tuition stimulates new demands for financial relief from new claimants, many of whom are far more politically potent than the poor.

Since the first G.I. Bill after World War II opened the modern era of higher education, Americans have understood that affordability is a key to college opportunity. In a world now shaped by the global economy and information technologies, education and training beyond high school are no longer discretionary for those who aspire to attain or to remain in the middle class.

But even as college has become more essential to the economic and civic success of individuals, communities, states and the nation, the burden for paying for it has shifted increasingly to students and families. If there were ever any general consensus about how responsibility for paying for college should be shared, no trace of it can be found in 2002. As D. Bruce Johnstone observes, “Whatever the causes, the fabric of the American ‘system’ of financial assistance and tuition policy seems to be unraveling.”

In the past, government—and colleges as well—have followed a course of least resistance in dealing with affordability. The erosion of affordability is rarely the outcome of considered policy. Rather it is the consequence of incremental, ad hoc policies that increased tuition and the share of family income required for college, underfunded need-based financial assistance, increased reliance on loans, and stimulated new claims for governmental relief from middle-income families.

We have backed into ineffectual affordability policies in the past. To do so in the future will virtually assure the continued erosion of college affordability. We urge positive approaches: explicit recognition of the relationship of family income levels to college affordability; high priority for need-based aid; and closer examination of the sustainability of institutional expenditure trends. These are not easy approaches, but they can enhance college opportunity if followed in both good and bad economic times.

—Patrick M. Callan

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Tuition and Fees 1990-1999

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Tuition and fees increased faster than state support for higher education.
Harsh Realities
A national report on the affordability of higher education

By William Trombley
Senior Editor

As a college degree becomes an almost obligatory ticket to a middle class life, the cost of postsecondary education has become less affordable for all but the richest Americans, a new report from The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education concludes.

The report, titled “Losing Ground,” looks at college costs from “the perspective of American families”—that is, how much of a family’s income goes to pay for tuition and mandatory fees at a public college or university.

It finds that the share of family income required to pay for college has increased significantly in recent years but the increases have not kept pace with tuition. For instance, Pell Grants, the federal government’s most important program for needy students, covered 98 percent of tuition in 1986 but only 57 percent 13 years later. Most state financial aid programs followed the same downward path, especially after many states began to award increasing amounts of assistance on the basis of “merit,” variously defined, not financial need.

• Colleges and universities have increased their own contributions to student financial aid but, again, this money often is allocated according to merit, not need. “There is no evidence that most of this aid targets low-income students in either the public or private sector,” the report states.

• Students are working longer hours and taking out larger loans, to make up the difference between college costs and what families can afford to pay. From 1989 to 1999, “average cumulative debt by seniors at public colleges and universities increased substantially for all income groups,” the report finds. “For those in the lowest income quartile, such debt grew from $7,829 to $12,888 (in constant dollars).”

This finding is accompanied by six short profiles of students at two-year and four-year schools around the country who are working longer hours, taking extra jobs, applying for every possible grant and scholarship and borrowing thousands of dollars in order to pay for their educations.

• Although state appropriations for higher education increased by 13 percent (in constant dollars per student) between 1980 and 1998, the report says, this was not enough to keep pace with tuition, which increased 107 percent, from $1,696 to $3,512 (in constant dollars) during the same time period.

All of these trends have combined to make higher education less affordable for all but the richest Americans. In a section titled “Taking Care of the Middle Class,” the report finds that the impact on middle-class families has been softened by a series of federal and state tax credits, savings plans and other programs benefiting students who would not be eligible for need-based financial aid.

But similar efforts have not been made to help low-income families, with the result that “the gap in college attendance rates between high and low-income Americans has widened, even among those who are prepared academically for college,” according to the report. “Just as college opportunity has become indispensable, it also has become less affordable.”

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (which also publishes National CrossTalk) is an independent, non-profit, nonpartisan organization which conducts policy research and fosters public awareness and discussion of public policy issues affecting education and training beyond high school. The National Center’s studies and reports, including “Losing Ground,” are intended to stimulate public policies that will improve the effectiveness and accessibility of higher education.
The number of students taking AP exams has increased nationally as well. In May 2001, 820,880 students took Advanced Placement exams, a 9.8 percent increase over the year before, and 34 percent higher than 1996. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia provide support in some form for AP courses. Some encourage or require AP classes in high schools, pay students' examination fees or help teachers attend AP training.

CLIMBED TO 146,922.

Ideally, Advanced Placement courses provide challenges for bright high school students who might otherwise be bored. Increasingly, students take the AP courses and exams to improve their chances to win admission to top-rated colleges.

The grants help schools train teachers to handle AP classes, provide tutors to help the students, and buy class materials. To qualify, a high school must either offer three or fewer advanced classes or no advanced math or science classes, have low college preparation rates, or have a majority of students whose families have sufficiently low incomes that they qualify for free or subsidized lunches. Out of 651 high schools in the state, around 350, the number earmarked in the legislation, have met one or more of these criteria, accord-

Rural high schools have been targeted in such efforts in California and elsewhere because they often cannot recruit teachers with the skills to handle AP calculus, economics or other advanced courses. Inner-city schools attended by African American and Latino students may also lack AP courses. Inglewood High School near Los Angeles offered only three AP courses three years ago—none in math or science—while Beverly Hills High School, serving a large number of more affluent white students, offered more than 14 AP classes.

This difference in access led four African American and Latino students at Inglewood to file a statewide class action suit in 1999 charging that they had been denied equal educational opportunity. The ACLU convened a team of UC professors, including Oakes, to address the access issues. That group found “a clear relationship between the level and type of AP offering and the demographics of a high school’s student population... whether high schools are large or small, the availability of AP courses decreases as the percentage of African American and Latinos in the school population increases.”

The team’s proposals for action became a blueprint for the challenge grant program, said Rocio Conoba, staff attorney with the ACLU of Southern California. She said that the ACLU is monitoring the program to confirm that the kind of students it represents—minorities and low-income—reap the benefits. Adjustments may be needed down the road, she added.

The grants help schools train teachers to handle AP classes, provide tutors to help the students, and buy class materials. To qualify, a high school must either offer three or fewer advanced classes or no advanced math or science classes, have low college preparation rates, or have a majority of students whose families have sufficiently low incomes that they qualify for free or subsidized lunches. Out of 651 high schools in the state, around 350, the number earmarked in the legislation, have met one or more of these criteria, accord-

Reese questions whether the program is truly reaching more kids “or just giving the same kids more opportunity. That’s not a good use of the money.” He is determined that in five years the enrollment in Bakersfield High’s AP classes will more closely mirror the ethnic makeup of the student body, which is 35 percent Hispanic and 13 percent African American.

When the challenge grant program began, about 80 percent of the students in Bakersfield High’s AP classes were white. That figure is down to 69 percent now with more minorities signing up. “The students who have not been in AP courses, no matter their ethnicity or socioeconomic group, are intelligent,” Reese said. “They just don’t have the support system.” The principal insists that “there should be an equitable distribution of knowledge in kids regardless of their skin color.”

Statewide, there are signs that more minority students are at least taking the AP exams, an indicator of increasing enrollments in the advanced classes that prepare students for these tests. A report prepared last fall for the state by the WestEd research firm found that among the AP challenge grant schools, “there was an increase in African American students of 20 percent and in Hispanic students of 23 percent” taking the exam. However, a June 2001 report by the Institute for Education Reform, affiliated with the California State University system, found that African Americans and Hispanics are still “considerably disproportionately underrepresented” in AP classes. “If they were to be enrolled in AP classes in proportion to their enrollment in the schools, their participation in AP classes would have to increase, on average, by about 100 percent,” according to the report.

Sal Frias, Mojave’s principal, says that even with all the training in the world, his school cannot offer many AP courses in typical face-to-face classroom situations. When the challenge grant program began, Mojave had only AP calculus. Frias used some of the grant money—his school has received $52,500 so far—for four teachers and himself to attend training institutes. Last year Mojave added AP English literature and language, history, calculus, economics and civics. Its students took 105 AP tests, compared to 14 the year before. Two years ago three Mojave students scored 3 or above on the tests. Last year 17, or 16.2 percent, passed the tests with scores of 3 or above.

With only 27 teachers, there could only be one section of each AP course last year. If students had a schedule conflict, they were out of luck. Frias wanted to expand access to AP courses to more of his students (54 percent of whom are white, 24 percent Latino, 10 percent African American, and 12 percent Native American and others). So he switched to online courses.

This year students are taking eight AP courses over the Internet through the University of California College Preparatory Initiative, which acquires online courses developed by commercial firms, educational institutions, UC faculty or high school faculty consulting with UC faculty. These courses are certified as meeting UC entrance requirements.

An AP test is worth 100 points. At Bakersfield, California, High School, 314 students took AP classes last year, but Principal David Reese wonders if the “challenge grant” program is “just giving the same kids more opportunity.”

The California “challenge grant” program has enabled Mojave High School Principal Sal Frias to increase the number of Advanced Placement courses from one to seven.
Although results are mixed, Frias says he is leaning toward continuing the online instruction—with the possible exception of AP calculus. “Math seems to require hands-on instruction” because of the complex concepts involved, he said, but there must be at least ten students to justify offering the class face-to-face. Frias hopes to add AP Spanish and perhaps physics next year. “I’m very competitive,” he said. “I want my school to be the best.” Much will depend on how the students fare in the AP tests this spring; last year the average overall AP test score for Mojave students was a low 1.75.

Seventy-one out of 90 Mojave students who signed up last fall stuck with AP courses during the first semester; 63 were still enrolled in the second semester. “Most of those who have dropped out of AP classes blame it on ‘I need a teacher in front of me,’” Frias said. “I tell them, ‘You go to college, you get a syllabus, you get books, you get the due dates for assignments and you go to work. If you think you are going to pal around with your professor and talk about what’s happening, it’s not going to happen.’” Taking courses online, he believes, helps prepare students for the impersonality of many large campuses like UC Berkeley and UCLA.

There is support for the students who have trouble with the material. Mojave has established an AP lab in a classroom with 26 computers. Students use them for their advanced courses during whatever period of the day that they leave free for that purpose, thus avoiding last year’s scheduling problems. A teacher is assigned to the lab each period and there is a technical support person as well.

Missy Losey, the computer specialist at Mojave, says that if one student has received an answer to a question through e-mail, he’ll share it with others taking the same class. In any class, “there’s always one kid who raises his hand,” she said. “There’s a lack of that in a setting like this when they are doing individual work, so e-mail is like raising your hand. That’s my analogy.”

Veronica Gomez, 18, sits quietly in the back of the room, reading “Jane Eyre” in paperback and checking her computer screen for background about what she’s reading. She e-mails her assignments to her instructor, a veteran high school teacher who works for Apex Learning, which provides the course for the UC college prep program.

At the end of each unit Gomez takes a test consisting of 20 multiple choice questions and an essay. These tests follow the format of the AP exam, so students become accustomed to it by the time they take the exam in May. Frias said that the UCPP program offered him the option of assigning proctors for these in-course online tests or using the honor system. He has opted for the latter. “There’s a lot of trust involved.”

Dave Bowerman of Apex Learning said that online instructors become familiar with students’ writing styles and performance, so they can spot marked differences that might lead them to suspect cheating. “Like Mr. Frias,” he said, “we have actually had very few reported instances of students suspected of cheating.”

Gomez works at McDonalds on weekends and is taking a night course to become a certified medical assistant to help put herself through college. She has been accepted by three University of California campuses—Berkeley, Irvine and Santa Barbara—and by two in the California State University system—Cal State Long Beach and San Francisco State—but has not yet decided where to go. She says that her parents moved to the United States in 1986 to give her more opportunity, and she hopes to study medical laboratory technology.

Elsewhere in the computer room, Kyna Cunningham, a junior, is working on her AP American history material. She is in the lab two periods in a row because she is also taking AP literature. “Third period gets pretty rowdy,” she said. “It gets a little hard. Sometimes I have to speak up” and ask lab mates to be quiet.

Amanda Warren, a junior taking AP literature, likes the independence of an online course. In the usual classes, she says, “there are kids who don’t want to do the work and they hold everybody back. In this, you go at your own pace.” The flip side is that if you need help, it is harder to get it when you need it. “With this approach the Internet,” she said, “you may get an answer but it may not be what you want and you have to e-mail again.”

AP classes online are not for everyone. Erik Hoffman, a junior, took AP English last term and dropped it after one semester. He says he started off okay but then the work became harder and he fell behind. He had other interests—sports among them—and he just couldn’t spend the time on it. “It would have been easier if there was an actual teacher. I could have got a response rather than having to e-mail. I could have gotten it cleared up and moved on.”

The responsibility was good for him, he added, but he wasn’t used to it.

Not every faculty member has been converted to Mojave’s push for more AP courses. Mark Hawthorne teaches chemistry and helps the one AP chemistry student with lab work, before or after school or on Saturdays.

“Honestly,” he says, “I think there’s only a select few high school students able to do the AP work. I think we’re promoting AP beyond what it was initially intended to be. I’m not a college professor. I can’t teach a college course.” But “today, if a kid doesn’t take an AP class, he’s at a disadvantage. So we’re forced to give our students AP classes to keep them competitive, even if a student may be better off doing something else.”

Michelle Nixon, who teaches both a sophomore AP class and a senior AP English class, finds that her seniors don’t have the same background that her AP sophomores now have. “For example, they are not as well versed in literary terms,” she said. The seniors “are not as strong writers,” AVID will help her students form a strong foundation, especially with their writing, she added. “For the AP exam, writing is important so that they can respond quickly and fluently to a piece of literature.”

Students in AP English read myths, Dante, Shakespeare and more modern texts—none of it easy material. “It would be irresponsible of us to encourage them to do something that we haven’t prepared them for,” Nixon said.

Several of Nixon’s AVID program sophomores took AP European history last fall. Dalila Vargas, who wants to go to UCLA, said that AVID helped her manage her time. “Since European history takes so much time, I know that I have to get my other homework done first.” AVID has taught her to see how much time each subject will take and to set priorities. Her classmates, Stacey Aviday, who also wants to go to UCLA, said that in AVID, they learn “higher order thinking.” That means, “you don’t just read the lines. You read between the lines.” For example, “if you are reading John Locke, you consider how his environment affected his ideas.”

With the AP challenge grant, Bakersfield Principal David Reese says, “you either lower the bar for the AP classes or you raise the preparation for the kids so that they can do the work. There’s a push for more kids to go to college and that’s good, but you can’t just say it and make it happen.” The school is like a surrogate parent through the AVID program, he added.

Ideally, he said, the kind of college prep skills that AVID offers should begin before high school. “The best marriage you could have,” Reese said, “would be feeder schools with the AVID program so that [students] are prepared when they get to high school.” But among the 15 middle schools that send students to Bakersfield High, only one has AVID.

Mojave has five AVID classes, two for freshmen, two for sophomores, one for juniors, all taught by Almee Hambly. This semester, for example, her class of juniors is concentrating on financial aid. Hambly also does regular notebook checks to make sure the students are taking good notes and staying organized. “In here, I make them pretty accountable,” she said. AVID students also have tutorials several times a week from local college students or other high school students especially knowledgeable in a field.

AVID and the online courses at Mojave are an example of how other programs mesh with the AP challenge grants. Mojave relies heavily on the UC College Preparatory Initiative. A division of the UC president’s office and located physically at UC Santa Cruz, UCPP works primarily with remote rural high schools, said its director, Elaine Wheeler. It offers 12 AP subjects online.

Three elements contribute to any school’s success with these advanced online courses, Wheeler said. Obviously, students need good access to computers—not computers in some one’s office or some other location with distractions. The program needs a strong sup...

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**When the challenge grant program began, about 80 percent of the students in Bakersfield High’s AP classes were white. That figure is down to 69 percent now with more minorities signing up.**

The principals at both Mojave and Bakersfield High Schools know that they can’t just throw many of their students into the AP pool and hope they can swim. They need preparation, and some of them are receiving it through the AVID program (Advancement Via Individual Determination). An international nonprofit program, AVID is underway at 471 California high schools and 393 middle schools as well as in other states and countries. California’s governor and legislature support the program, and the state budget covers some of the schools’ AVID costs; they often use other grants to pay the rest.

Bakersfield has an AVID school for two years and targets students who have high test scores but who may not have much of a support system at home. Their parents may not have gone to college and may not be familiar with what their children need to know to gain university admission.

Thirty Bakersfield High freshmen and thirty sophomores have made the commitment that they want to go to college and are willing to give up other electives to take the AP course each year they are in high school. They learn to take notes effectively, how to manage their time, how to write more coherently, how to think more analytically and ask intelligent questions, and how to work collaboratively—all skills that teachers know their students will need to get into college and stay there to graduate.

Pauline Steward is one of 12 students in an Advanced Placement studio art class at Bakersfield High School. The program was started three years ago for students who may not be scientifically oriented.
The World’s Community College

Diversity in action at LaGuardia

By Ron Feemster

GAIL MELLOW, president of LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York, understands why institutions like hers are important. She began her higher education at Jamestown Community College in the southwestern corner of New York state. She juggled classes, a full-time job and a two-year-old daughter. She knew then—and remembers today—that school was not her most urgent priority. At the same time, it was a life-transforming process that opened up opportunities beyond any that she might have imagined for herself. “If there hadn’t been a community college in my town,” she said, “I might be working for Wal-Mart today.”

A look of consternation passed briefly over Mellow’s face, as if she were considering the possibility that remarks about working at a retail chain are somehow insensitive, when hundreds of her full-time students are hoping to keep similar jobs in a tight New York job market. What she meant, she pointed out quickly, is that she couldn’t have gotten here without her beginnings at a local community college.

“Here” is a spacious corner office in one of the refurbished factory buildings that LaGuardia calls home. A photo on the bookshelf over her head shows Mellow and four other community college presidents shooting rapids in a rubber raft. The American Association of Community Colleges sponsors the annual Outward Bound-style initiation in Colorado for newly appointed presidents. She took the trip in 1998, the summer after her first year as president of Gloucester Community College in southern New Jersey.

Two years later she was being considered for three vacant community college presidencies in the City University of New York system. LaGuardia, she told the search committees, was the only job she would take in New York. If they had asked, she would have told them that running LaGuardia was the only job in the country that could have hured her from the comfortable position in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

What was special about LaGuardia? Dozens of challenges and opportunities that start and end with a single fact: LaGuardia’s diversity. With students from 140 nations, speaking 104 languages—some second-generation immigrants and some right off the plane—the school is a microcosm of Queens, perhaps the most ethnically diverse county in the United States. If Queens is a microcosm of the world, LaGuardia is the world’s community college.

Students at LaGuardia have lived through war in Bosnia, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, guerrilla kidnappings in Colombia, even slavery in the Sudan. When political violence struck New York last September, the campus was shocked but not cowed, according to Mellow. At a spontaneous school assembly convened last September 12 (which would have been the third day of classes) students reflected on their strength as well as their vulnerability, on the richness of a campus community whose members hail from five continents. “This place is so diverse, you can’t drop a bomb anywhere in the world without hurting someone on this campus,” said a student the college president likes to quote.

A walk around campus

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addition to regular class meetings every week. Some 3,500 other students show up for tutorials every year. Any teacher in any course on campus can suggest that a student attend the writing center. Writing and remediation are not among the sexiest programs at the community college, but everyone from Gail Mellow on down brings up the writing center in English.

Most students meet their tutors in a warren of tiny cubicles with four or five chairs around the table. The furniture points up the biggest problem LaGuardia’s writing teachers face. “Teaching writing is all about relationships,” Eisenstadt said. “One-to-one teaching works the best. You can still accomplish many of the same goals in a two-to-one setting. But three-to-one is too much like a small group.”

“You can’t assume that a student who finished ESL 099 last fall with a good 300-word essay will succeed in remedial English. They could stay on the same level for a while without the writing center and other supports.”

Even at the depressed tutor wages, there simply isn’t enough money at LaGuardia to teach writing one on one. There is no formula for creating productive groups. In general, group teaching slows progress, Eisenstadt says, which in turn feeds the political objections to community college education. New York City has decreased its share of community college funding, even during the boom years of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s mayoralty, with the argument that too few students graduate on time. “One percent of our students graduate on time,” Eisenstadt said. “I find it surprising that any graduate on time. They work in factories. They have spouses and parents who don’t speak English. They write term papers in a second language. Why would they graduate on time?”

Community, cooperation, direction

If the writing center is what gets new arrivals and underachievers on track in the classroom, the Cooperative Education program helps students chart a future course in the outside world. Every LaGuardia student must complete two semester-long internships to graduate. In addition to getting their feet wet in a field that interests them, students attend seminars to help decide if they want to pursue a four-year degree or go right to work after graduation. Employers include large manufacturers and banks, small shops specializing in photography or design, magazines, television networks and newspapers, non-profits and government agencies.

“We sometimes offer occupational training, as in travel or hotel reservations,” said Jack Rainey, the director of cooperative education at the college. “But sometimes the career exploration is much less specific. It also depends on what the company needs. At Verizon (the local telephone provider), students have been repairing derelict equipment and building new networks.”

At Community Board 3 in Queens, a local government advisory body funded by the city, one LaGuardia student per semester works on a prototype for a Community Board Web site. Tom Lowenhaupt, one of 50 volunteer board members whose own company donated server space for the site, explains the scope of the project, gives students direction and sends them home to write the code. “This is not just about programming in HTML or Java,” Lowenhaupt said. “I try to teach them to solve a communications problem. They need to learn to think about the site from the user’s point of view.”

Every intern is likely to have a slightly different work experience, since each company tends to develop its own co-op model, Rainey said. One technology firm that uses LaGuardia interns on a help desk hired LaGuardia graduates (former interns) to supervise the rotating crop of workers. “We want them to have enough experience on the job to begin to think about the world of work. We offer hope, encouragement, and a little bit of reality.”

The best and worst of times

In 1991, two years before Giuliani was elected mayor of New York, the city contributed $121 million dollars to CUNY’s community colleges, or 42.4 percent of the budget. Tuition payments of $61.5 million represented 21.6 percent of the budget. By 2002, when he left office, the city contribution in current dollars had dropped to $101 million, or 28 percent, while tuition payments had more than doubled to $135.5 million, or 37.5 percent. State aid remained nearly constant in percentage terms during the same period, falling to 34.5 percent from 36 percent. Tuition has doubled, in current dollars, to $1,250 per semester for full-time students.

“We suffered during those years,” said Richard Elliott, vice president for finance and administration. “The mayor was not an ardent supporter of community colleges, probably because he did not have as much control over CUNY as he would have liked.” Elliott described the 1990s as a period of trying to get by from year to year. Even today, he sees paying day-to-day expenses as one of the greatest challenges facing the community college during the next five years. The school is about to settle a faculty contract dispute and has agreed to a labor settlement with its civil servant employees that will cost the school about $1 million.

There is no money in the budget to fund the settlements as of yet, according to Elliott. The school has made cuts where it could—everywhere from cleaning and building maintenance to leaving vacant staff positions unfilled. With a new mayor in City Hall, the school hoped for additional funding from the city. But faced with a budget deficit of $4.8 million, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has called for cuts across nearly all city agencies.

Reaching out

In an attempt to make up the shortfall in city funding, LaGuardia has aggressively pursued grants. In the 1991-92 academic year, the school brought in $6.4 million in grants. In 2000-01, LaGuardia received $13.4 million in grants from government sources and private foundations. “We doubled the dollar volume of grants in the last ten years, but it isn’t nearly enough,” Elliott said. The school also has a private foundation that will eventually produce an income stream. Community college alumni rarely make significant financial contributions to their alma mater.

Among the largest grants the school has received are two federal Title V grants for $3.5 million, awarded to institutions that serve large Hispanic populations. One dedicates $400,000 per year for the next five years to

continued next page

The LaGuardia campus is located in three former factory buildings in the New York City borough of Queens.
LA GUARDIA from preceding page
upgrade computer networks and fiber-optic data lines. But introducing technology into a greater number of classrooms is only the beginning of the tasks set by the school. In the long run, the school wants to require almost every student to create an online portfolio that would become part of the school’s graduation requirements. In addition to posting term papers and similar projects, the LaGuardia would ask students to put up videos of final speeches or dramatic performances, original music, or photos of sculptures and paintings.

“We will have the portfolio project going as a pilot project in a few classes first,” Elliott said. “If it works out, we see it as a campus-wide requirement.” To ease the introduction of this requirement among the school’s senior faculty members, many of whom were hired in the 1970s and have not hurried into the computer age, LaGuardia has designed a program in which students become technology mentors for faculty.

The school was among several singled out for recognition this year by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Based in large part on work done at Middle College High School, a total of $40 million was awarded to a number of foundations, which will distribute the money to community schools doing similar work throughout the United States. The grant aims to replicate a secondary education model pioneered at LaGuardia. At Middle College, students at risk of dropping out of high school are placed in smaller classes within smaller schools and challenged to do college work. Instead of merely finishing high school, students are expected to earn an associate’s degree within a five-year span.

LaGuardia has grown by expanding adult and continuing education from 19,000 enrollments in 1996 to more than 28,000 in 2000. The heart of the growth strategy is figuring out what services the public needs. The school was among the first to train taxi drivers; it has developed a program to help deaf adults transition from high school to college; and it has become a leader in training paramedics and emergency medical technicians. Enrollment in the ESL program grew by 25 percent between 1996 and 2000, topping 2,000 registrants that year. Participants ranged in age from 16 to more than 60. Spurred mostly by immigration to Queens, the English language program has also become an expensive option for free spirits like Kazu Miyoshi, 33, an architect from Japan who quit his corporate job to become a sculptor. He wants to learn English before traveling the world to look at art. “Friends in Japan told me to come here,” he said.

And when the student cannot come to LaGuardia, the community college takes school to the student. LaGuardia receives $1.3 million from the New York City Department of Corrections each year to teach high school equivalency courses in jail. The program serves a highly transient population, given that most city inmates are awaiting trial, and no convicted criminal serves a sentence longer than one year in a city facility. “We have to set short-term goals,” said Linda Gilberto, the head of Continuing and Adult Education at LaGuardia. “But we sometimes have a lasting effect.”

LaGuardia is the kind of community that challenges assumptions, whether about the way to teach a diverse group, or the goals appropriate for at-risk high school students. As an institution, it has enjoyed great success, but it does not have all of the answers, as Gail Mellow readily admits. It does view its greatest challenge as its greatest opportunity: The same mind-boggling diversity that makes simple communication an adventure guarantees a fresh point of view every day. “We don’t really know what’s next,” Mellow said. Sometimes we have to say: Let’s just learn our way through this.”

Ron Feemster is a freelance writer based in New York City.

“The school hoped for additional funding from the city. But faced with a budget deficit of $4.8 million Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been forced to call for cuts across nearly all city agencies.

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porter in a school’s administration. And there has to be a strong coach or mentor for the students. “They may be young adults but they are not independently acting yet,” she said. “They are not used to working on their own as much as older people might be. If a faculty member has a lot of energy, it clicks.”

UCCP holds summer AP teacher training institutes in conjunction with the College Board, which produces the AP tests. These workshops “focus on the art of teaching—how to take students to a different level of preparation,” according to Gail Chapman, the College Board’s project director for the California AP initiative. The people leading the training have been readers of the Advanced Placement exams in the past, so they can talk to the teachers about that process.

Nancy Putney, who chairs Bakersfield High’s art department, has attended three of these training sessions to prepare herself to teach AP studio art. “I couldn’t do it without the helpful hints of experts,” she said. The training has also helped her to see what students are capable of. “I can expect more independent and creative work, and not hold their hands and be a mother any longer.”

David Reese and Putney didn’t want Bakersfield High’s Advanced Placement courses to neglect students who were not scientifically oriented, and so they launched the AP studio art program three years ago. Twelve students are enrolled this year. Rather than taking a paper-and-pencil (or online) test as other AP students do, the artists prepare a portfolio of their work that is judged for its quality, breadth and concentration.

Within California and nationally, not everyone is enamored of AP courses. Michael Kirst, professor of education at Stanford University, cites those who believe the AP exams “are not all that good.” What’s been done typically is a survey of the average college courses in a field, and the test is geared to measure students’ mastery of that material, Kirst said. Thus, the tests are not based on the best courses. “They’ve done what is, not what ought to be,” Kirst said, adding that it is hard to do what ought to be. Because there is a certain amount of territory that an AP teacher must cover, the students also cannot veer off at length on what could be interesting tangents, like the impact of the events of September 11 on U.S. history, or events leading to women winning the right to vote. Advanced math and science classes often make students memorize too much at the expense of a deeper understanding of the concepts involved, according to a report published last February by the National Research Council of the National Academies. The report also echoed the call for increasing access to these courses to minorities and students from low-income families.

Caliifornia launched its AP challenge grant program when its economy was booming. That is not the case anymore. But Ron Fox of the California Department of Education says the governor’s current budget proposal does not cut the challenge grant program. However, the state legislature has not yet passed its appropriations, and California schools face other budget cuts that could affect their programs.

So far, analysis of the California effort has been limited. Eileen Warren of the California Institute on Human Services at Sonoma State University did a survey last August to provide, among other things, a data base for the state secretary of education on AP courses at California high schools. She found that in 1999–2000 there were 90 schools offering three or fewer or no AP courses. Thirty-five of these schools increased their rigorous course offerings to four or more in 2000–2001. Twenty-five of these schools were AP challenge grant recipients, and their AP course offerings increased eightfold in that time.

When the challenge grants were created, no money was included for administration or assessment, Fox said. His office is working with Jeannie Oakes at UCLA and others to find funds to conduct a study on the effect of the challenge grants. Because California is the largest user of AP for college admissions and credit, and because of the challenge grant program, the state “provides a useful case for the nation,” Oakes wrote in her study proposal.

“The state needs to know what it really takes to make these courses and tests more universally available and whether these efforts “actually enhance college preparation and college going,” Oakes added. If all the program does is raise the bar for students to be competitive for admission to Berkeley and UCLA, she wrote, then students at schools with fewer AP courses available will be further disadvantaged.

“If [African Americans and Hispanics] were to be enrolled in AP classes in proportion to their enrollment in the schools, their participation in AP classes would have to increase, on average, by about 100 percent.”

—Institute for Education Reform

Mojave High School chemistry teacher Mark Hartsock believes “there's only a select few high school students able to do the AP work,” but others are pushed into taking the classes to get into college.
**Soka University**

**Can a tiny Buddhist college succeed in the competitive world of private higher education?**

By Anne C. Roark

ALISO VIEJO, CALIFORNIA

In the spring of her senior year at Santa Monica High School, Nicole Chu was in an enviable position. Letters of acceptance had arrived from Brown, Swarthmore, Haverford, Wesleyan, three campuses of the University of California (Berkeley, UCLA and Santa Cruz), the University of Southern California, and Soka University of America.

Chu decided to go to Soka, a tiny Buddhist college that opened last fall in a housing development in Orange County, halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego. The decision to attend a virtually unknown, unaccredited institute—located in an area better known as the home of Disneyland and the John Birch Society—could not have been an easy one. But Chu, along with 119 other brave souls, decided to gamble that this new college would provide a rigorous liberal arts education, and one day would be as esteemed as the colleges and universities Chu was turning down.

The college’s stated mission is to produce “a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life.” To Daniel Habuki, Soka’s president who is himself a product of Soka education in Japan, the mission statement means that “the main concern, the sense of commitment of each student, [whether he or she becomes] a businessman or a diplomat or a lawyer, is to serve the community. Students should have a vision to make society better, and not just be concerned with their own personal success. In other words, to become rich is not enough.”

In keeping with a Buddhist commitment to world peace, the curriculum focuses on multicultural studies and international relations. Courses tend to be interdisciplinary and encompass both Western and Eastern perspectives, with special focus on the Pacific Rim. Although classes are taught in English, students are required to study at least one language that is not their native tongue—Spanish, Chinese and Japanese will be offered—and spend at least one semester at a university in a country where that language is spoken.

The odds, of course, are against any new educational institution making it in the competitive world of private higher education—even one with lofty goals. Typically, every year in the United States three private colleges open and five close, according to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. Over the decades, California has attracted more than its share of flaky ideas in education and fly-by-night institutions. Yet many educators and policy makers are betting the state’s newest entry into the world of higher learning will not fail.

“I give it a better chance of succeeding than anything in the last century,” said David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

“We’re here to stay for the next couple hundred years—one thousand years maybe,” said Archibald E. Asawa, Soka’s vice president for administrative affairs. “You take one look at these buildings and you know we’re not going anywhere,” Asawa explained, speaking from his office on Soka’s new $245 million campus.

Situated on 103 acres overlooking a 4,000-acre wilderness park, the campus was designed by a group of leading architects to resemble an old Tuscan hillside village, with variegated red-tiled roofs, earth-colored stucco, and hand-hewn travertine stone from an ancient family quarry in Italy. An art gallery; an athenaeum; an Olympic-size swimming pool; a 200-million-gallon, one-acre lake; and a 100-foot brass dome all grace the campus. Soka even has its own olive trees and the newest (and perhaps remaining) orange groves in Orange County.

A telling sign of the university’s confidence in its future is that one of the first 18 buildings to be constructed was an alumni center—four years before the college will graduate its first student. Perhaps an even more reliable indicator of the university’s potential for success is that, in addition to a stunning campus, Soka boasts a hefty $300 million endowment. Officials had hoped that within two years of opening, the college’s returns on its endowment’s investments, plus tuition, would cover operating costs. Given current market conditions, that level of financial stability may be delayed, but only by a year or two, Asawa said.

In the meantime, the university is raising a separate $100 million endowment for scholarship funds to assist students who cannot afford the college’s $17,000 tuition, plus $7,500 for room and board. Now about 80 percent of the students receive some financial assistance, with 20 percent on “full ride,” which is fairly typical of private colleges today, according to the independent college association.

In addition to money and buildings, Soka has its own built-in applicant pool. Its founding institution, Soka Gakkai International (SGI), is a lay affiliate of the largest Buddhist sect in Japan, estimated to have somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 members worldwide. In the U.S., the bulk of members are part of the baby boom generation, many of whose children are now old enough for college. (See sidebar.)

Soka downplays its religious ties. Courses are strictly secular, and there is no chapel or organized religion on campus. Yet a Buddhist sense of egalitarianism pervades the campus. There are no faculty ranks (everyone who teaches at Soka is a professor); there are no departments (only “learning areas”); there are no assigned parking places (with more than 1,600 places, Soka may be the only university in the United States without a parking problem). All offices, from the president’s on down, are the same size. And everyone calls each other by first name.

Most high-ranking officials, especially those overseeing the financial operation of the college, are members of SGI, as are about 15 percent of the first year’s entering class. Eric Hauber, who is vice president for enrollment services and long-term planning, anticipates the proportion of non-Buddhist students will rise as the college becomes better known.

In contrast to the student body and admin-

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**The college’s stated mission is to produce “a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life.”**

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A 200-million-gallon, one-acre lake serves as a background for Soka University President Daniel Habuki (right) and Archibald Asawa, vice president for administrative affairs.

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The new university has a $245 million campus, a $300 million endowment and 120 students.
permanent. Half the current faculty came on leaves; all but three have decided to stay.

This is definitely not for everyone,” cautioned Anne M. Houtman, assistant dean of faculty and professor of biology. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity... but there is a lot of chaos, a lot of stress” involved in building a new college from the ground up. A specialist in the behavioral ecology of birds, Houtman, like virtually all the faculty at Soka, has impressive academic credentials—an undergraduate degree from Pomona College, a master’s from UCLA, a doctorate from Oxford. She left a tenure-track position at Knox College in Illinois to come to Soka.

Nancy J. Hodes, professor of Chinese language and Asian culture and interim director of the language program, came to Soka from Harvard. At the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, she was an associate editor of a multi-volume annotated translation of Mao Zedong’s pre-1949 writings. She taught at Boston College and Tufts University and has been associate director of the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, an SGI-sponsored think tank dedicated to peace-related issues. Although American by birth, Hodes was raised in China and has been an outspoken peace advocate, especially during the Vietnam War, when she was an undergraduate at Radcliffe College. Hodes is also a member of SGI, although she is “the last person you would think, given my family thought religion was the opiate of the masses and all that.” The point is, she said, “this institution was made for me and I was made for it.”

Ken Saragosa, professor of English, is not a member of SGI, and yet he feels at home at Soka in another way. He has the usual impressive academic credentials—a master’s from UC Berkeley, a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, a teaching position at Swarthmore—but his personal background is anything but usual. His mother is Japanese, his father is Mexican, and Saragosa himself grew up in Nebraska.

Having never really felt at home anywhere, he looked around one of his classes one day and realized the people he was teaching were not all that different from himself. There was a Japanese student who grew up in Spain speaking Spanish; a Vietnamese who grew up in America speaking English; a Chinese American who also grew up speaking English but whose Chinese father came from Peru and spoke Spanish and whose Chinese mother came from Japan and spoke Japanese.

With half of its students from countries outside the U.S., Soka sees itself not as a national institution but an international one. It has perhaps the largest percentage of foreign students of any college in the country.

“Involving students from around the world, learning their customs and way of thinking has been a tremendous advantage,” said Filipino Navarro, who is a Roman Catholic from the Philippines and Soka’s first student body president. Navarro, who sees his future in business, diplomacy or international law, said he spoke to people and studied all that was on the Internet about Soka very carefully before coming. “I realized if I went to Soka and were to become a world leader, I’d be ready.”

Despite the pride Soka takes in having a multicultural, multilingual student body, there are disadvantages to such diversity. Faculty members complain that while Soka students are very bright and astonishingly motivated, there is a great range in their academic performance, in part because of differences in their grasp of English. The average score on the Test for English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is 573. Depending on the institution, minimum scores run between 500 and 550 for undergraduates and 600 for graduate students, Hau said.

This winter, the workload at Soka was so demanding on some students that the 24-hour reading room in the library was packed with people pulling all-nighters night after night. “What are all feeling the pressure,” said Siobhan Boland, an American student who came to Soka from Northern California.

In some cases, classes are easy, too easy; in others, the workload is overwhelming. “In some classes I barely opened a book and got a B. Others were intense, a lot of very dense reading that practically no one could get through,” Boland said.

No one has flunked out yet, and at the other end of the spectrum, only one student—the first admitted to Soka—left, wanting more offerings in the hard sciences.

Whatever their feelings about the difficulty of the classes, Navarro, the student body president, echoes the views of many students who feel the pressure to excel simply because they are part of the founding class. As Boland put it, “We know the success of this place depends in part on our work.”

In addition to the academic load, students feel the pressure to fulfill the college’s mission—that is, to contribute to society, not just when they graduate but now, which is a lot to ask of 18 and 19 year olds who also want to kick back and have fun.

While it is too early to know if Soka will produce the kind of graduates who will change the world, many Soka students already are extending themselves to the local community. Some are volunteering to help in nearby elementary schools; others, with the help of faculty, are hoping to set up research projects involving nearby wetlands which will help the community manage its environmental resources.

With its beaches and parks and outdoor recreational offerings, Orange County may seem an unlikely place for all of this intensity. In fact, it almost didn’t happen in Orange County. A decade ago, Soka thought it would be building a campus on property it owned in Calabasas, a suburb north of Los Angeles. Environmentalists protested, saying that no further building could be done on one of the last undeveloped valleys in the Santa Monica Mountains.

While they were unable to seize the property from Soka, the protestors did manage to stop any further building.

Soka’s founders tried to take the setback in Calabasas in stride and move forward, using existing buildings on the land. Yet some involved in the dispute are still smarting from the fight, saying that part of the opposition in Calabasas was clearly caused by anti-Asian sentiment and by fears that SGI was a cult with ulterior motives.

If Orange County has had such concerns, it hasn’t shown them. A developer for the newly incorporated town of Aliso Viejo was the one who suggested Soka locate there. Since the college opened its doors last August, local citizens have been attending lectures and concerts. And so many residents of nearby Leisure World have heard about the tasty cuisine in the international student-faculty cafeteria that lunch hours are beginning to look like Grandparents’ Day.

Its midwestern friendliness and Mediterranean climate notwithstanding, Orange County has not been an easy selling point for the college. From the freeway, there is little to see except endless monotonous clusters of red-tiled roofs. Moreover, the cost of housing in those developments is so high as to be almost prohibitive for college professors, even with competitive salaries and generous benefit packages.

When Jonathan Lee Merzel, professor of mathematics, came to Soka from Northern California, he was aghast to read a local survey showing that Denny’s had been voted “best breakfast” in Orange County. Michael Hays, professor of humanities and comparative literature, demurs. While he came from Rhode Island (where he lived) and New York (where he taught at Cornell, NYU and Columbia), Hays argued there are many good restaurants in Orange County, although he named only one. Orange County is like Providence, Hays said: "Once considered a dreadful place to live, it has become extremely desirable. “I have had good meals and fine wine here, and I look forward to many more such experiences," Hays said confidently.

He and the rest of the faculty may need some pleasant diversions to get through the coming months. Despite its enviable start, Soka has a dizzying number of details to address and some major ideological issues to settle.
Decisions must be made, for example, on how to evaluate students. Letter grades or written evaluations? (Both are used now.)

Agreements have to be reached on what languages to add to the curriculum. French and German, following the path of traditional colleges? Or Vietnamese and Korean, in keeping with the college’s Pacific Rim emphasis? Just getting the language program up and running will begin next year.

Some professors are hired for three-year probationary periods during which time they will be evaluated first on teaching, then on scholarship, and finally on service. Anyone falling short will be counseled through workshops and seminars, but eventually will be let go if they do not measure up.

Critics wonder what would happen if a teacher takes a controversial position on a divisive subject or in some other way falls out of favor. Will his or her job be secure? A representative from a faculty association explained to the Orange County Register that being in a college without tenure is like being on an episode of “Survivor.” People can be voted off the island just because they are unpopular.

Soka’s governance plan and budgeting process have had a better reception. The president does not make unilateral decisions. Instead, “user” groups, representative committees of people affected by the decisions, are the first to make policy recommendations. The president, in turn, either accepts the recommendations or brings them back to the committee for further discussion.

Similarly, an “open” budget process means that fiscal decisions are not made behind closed doors by a chancellor or CEO in concert with their golfing buddies, Asawa said. Instead, a budget committee decides where to increase expenditures and where to make cuts. This year, for example, the committee wanted to continue to make student resources a priority, and so, to keep within the budget, reduced the number of days that offices will be closed each week.

Rather than altering the food service and student union, Asawa said, the committee decided to cut travel expenditures for professional meetings.

**Soka Gakkai International**

**Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism became popular with the counterculture of the 1960s**

SOKA GAKKAI INTERNATIONAL (SGI), founder of the University of America, is a lay Buddhist organization started in Japan in 1930 as an educational reform movement. Its aim was to do away with rote memorization in schools and unthinking loyalty to authority. Imprisoned as “thought criminals,” the organization’s leaders converted to a form of Buddhism based on the 13th century religious philosophy of Nichiren Daishonin, which emphasized individual enlightenment and achievement as a way to world peace.

A Japanese group of Turkish Muslim students in Japan at one time, the group under the current leadership of Daisaku Ikeda has toned down its religious rhetoric, diversified its activities in Japan, and expanded its worldwide membership to between 40,000 and 100,000. SGI now supports arts programs, runs a publishing empire, and operates an elementary-secondary school system focused on critical thinking. In 1971 the organization established Soka University of Japan, and in 2001 opened Soka University of America, a sister institution with its own governing board and administration.

While its involvement in Japanese politics, especially its anti-authoritarian and reformist stance, earned SGI a controversial reputation in Japan, the group has gone largely unnoticed in the United States. The only notable exception to SGI’s quiet co-existence alongside other religious and educational organizations has been what University of California’s Phillip Hammond calls a “minor and short-lived controversy” over plans to build its university in a suburb north of Los Angeles. Hammond, professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, is a co-author of the book, “Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion” (Oxford, 1999).

SGI probably is not as well known in America as Zen or Tibetan Buddhism, both of which have been the subject of books and Hollywood movies in recent years. While followers of other sects of Buddhism use meditation as a form of prayer and shun the importance of the material world, Nichiren Daishonin Buddhists seek improvements in this present world and in their own personal lives. They do this by studying and by chanting, morning and night, a simple mantra: Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (The words literally translate: devotion-mystic-law-cure & effect and teaching, although the “true meaning,” followers say, can only be understood through “a lifetime of practice.”)

“Many positive changes, such as better health, a happier family, or an improved financial situation will be seen early on in one’s practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism,” promises a flyer sent out by members of SGI’s Los Angeles branch.

Despite such claims, SGI members are “sensitive to the appearance of practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism,” Hammond found in a 1997 survey of the organization. “When Soka Gakkai members chant for a new car, better relationships, or such, the goal is to affect internal changes that allow them to control their external circumstances and achieve these goals... Soka Gakkai believe that as individuals become enlightened and improve their own life conditions, the lives of people around them will also be improved.”

Originally practiced in America almost exclusively by Japanese woman (the wives of U.S. servicemen), Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism became popular with the counterculture of the 1960s, as “an alternative to psychedelic drugs as a means of consciousness raising,” Hammond found. Because followers of Nichiren Daishonin look and behave like everyone else in the United States, the religion did not stir the same kind of controversy that faced other new religions such as ISKCON (Hare Krishna) and the Unification Church (Moonies). While the visibility of those groups has diminished, SGI has grown steadily in size and diversity. Although there are still more women than men, only a tiny minority is Japanese.

Today, Hammond said, most of the members of SGI are professionals or part of the “new class” information society. They tend to be more liberal politically than the general population. They also are far better educated and somewhat older. Many are members of the baby boom generation, and they have children of an age to be looking at colleges.

Whether Soka will be able to maintain such openness and flexibility is a question in many minds. As the administration of the college grows larger and more complex, people naturally will have to become more specialized and compartmentalized. “There simply won’t be time for everyone to do everything,” said Wendy J. Harder, Soka’s director of community relations.

Already, there seems to be too little time to attend to all the details.

Alfred Balitzer continues to interview job candidates—sometimes as many as three a day. “It’s been hell on wheels around here,” he complained lightheartedly. “Some days I don’t know whether I’m talking anthropology to the Spanish teacher or Spanish to the biology teacher.”

And President Habuki—Danny, as he is known on campus—continues the Sisyphean task of raising money. Despite what may seem vast resources, Soka is already planning a major capital campaign to complete the second phase of its building project, which will increase the college’s current capacity of 500 students to 1,200.

While finding those students may not be as difficult for Soka as it has been for some colleges, it will still be a challenge. This year’s founding class had average SAT scores of 1130; 12 to 13 percent were in the top percent of their high school graduating classes; 88 percent were in the top 25 percent. As far as Habaker is concerned, the numbers tell only part of the story. “Think about the kind of student who would come to a brand new institution. They’re not ordinary students. Add to that a large Asian population, who as a group tend to work hard, and you have a remarkable student body.”

There are, however, not as many applicants for next year as there were a year ago. In fact, Soka received 322 completed applications for the 2001-02 academic year, only 225 for 2002-03. So many of last year’s applicants were so strong, the college ended up admitting 120 students, rather than 100 as planned. Even though they had to start over as freshmen, about 30 percent of the entering class were transfers from other colleges; three students already had their bachelor’s degrees.

This year, however, Soka will limit itself to 100 new freshmen. Though the numbers are down, Hauber insists he is not alarmed, for he is convinced the flurry of applicants last year was partly brought on by the urge of many students to be in the founding class.

It was a factor for Nicole Chu. It was not an easy decision to turn down some of the most prestigious colleges in the country to attend a place few people had even heard of. But Nicole came to Soka in part for the chance to help create something new that she feels is important. “Being part of this—having the chance to help build something like this—that is an opportunity not everyone gets.”

“I know I’ve probably idealized Soka,” Chu said, reflecting on her year. “Sometimes I get frustrated, but then I realize that’s part of the point of being here, to challenge yourself, to go through the struggles.” If she has regrets, she has been too busy to dwell on them. And that’s not to mention the “amazing” courses she has gotten to take this year.

So will she come back next year? There is no hint of hesitation in her answer.

“Oh yes.”

—Anne C. Roark

Anne C. Roark is a former higher education writer for the Los Angeles Times.
“Politically correct” language continues to spark debate on and off campus

By Todd Sallo

THE MASCOT of the Fighting Whities is a chipper middle-aged white guy with slicked-back hair who looks a little like Ozzie Nelson, or something out of a 1950s cigarette ad. Grinning broadly, he says, “Every Thang’s Gonna Be All White!”

An intramural basketball team at the University of Northern Colorado, The Fighting Whities were organized last February by a group of students who chose the name, “to have a little satirical fun and to deliver a simple, sincere, message about ethnic stereotyping,” according to the team’s Web site—launched as a response to the unexpected maestros of national attention they have received.

The team wanted “to make a straightforward statement using humor; to promote cultural awareness through satire,” and it generally has been received as intended, as a humorous lark that also delivers a message. Scott Ostler, of the San Francisco Chronicle, wondered, “How are the Whities going to be able to win if they can’t jump?”

Still, the Fighting Whities really touched a nerve, both on and off campus. Like all good satire, the humor derives from an association with the familiar: We all have seen various groups, especially Native Americans, caricatured in this manner, and used as mascots. It is a sensitive issue, and one that many colleges and universities are addressing, if belatedly and somewhat reluctantly. At the very least, using these mascots gives the appearance of hypocrisy, considering that the higher education community has tended to be at the forefront of progressive racial, ethnic and gender politics—what might be called political correctness—for decades.

The term “politically correct” seems to have originated in leftist circles, who used it to describe “modern” ways of thought, or to admonish those who adhered too strictly to a dogmatic “party line.” By the late 1980s, however, the term was being appropriated by conservatives to criticize and attack changes in attitudes and course offerings on college campuses.

Curricular revisions, for instance, that were intended to make higher education more inclusive or “multicultural” in orientation were derided as mere “political correctness.”

And mixed up in all of it was the hot-button issue of affirmative action, and similar programs, which have never been embraced by the right. Once again, the “culture wars” were heating up. And the college campus was ground zero.

In 1989, Stanford University made a much-publicized revision in its core western civilization course—placing more emphasis on women and racial minorities. Other major universities, like The University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin, followed suit. Colleges revised descriptors for minority groups and began instituting speech codes aimed at controlling “hate” speech.

Conservatives seized the opportunity to engage in a battle over these issues. In 1991 the first President George Bush delivered a controversial commencement address at the University of Michigan in which he condemned “the dangers of political correctness.” There was a flurry of articles in Newsweek, Time, U.S. News and World Report, the New York Times, the Village Voice, and others about the new political correctness on campuses.

Today, the term “politically correct”—with its vague Soviet overtones bringing to mind a shadowy “thought police”—is inherently dismissive. Like “tree hugger,” it generally is used derogatively, and mostly by those who oppose what it represents. Conservatives contend that political correctness—and all of the efforts to broaden curriculum and to make institutions of higher learning more accessible to minorities—is an unnecessary exercise. They argue that it addresses appearances only—and therefore has no real effect—and that it actually is counterproductive, “Balkanizing” force.

The term “politically correct,” or “PC,” is now part of the vernacular outside of academia as well. And everyone is engaged, in some way or another, in the debate.

But is this all just semantics? At its core, this is simply the age-old debate about the power of language. On the one hand are people who liken modern academia to the “Royal Academy of Lagado” in Jonathan Swift’s “Gulliver’s Travels” with its solemn “projectors” laboring to extract sunbeams from cucumbers and to build houses from the roof down. Their contention is that attempting to achieve social progress by changing the way we use language is mere window dressing, and ultimately futile.

On the other hand are those who are more in sympathy with George Orwell, who wrote: “If thought corrupts language, language also can corrupt thought.” They believe that words influence thoughts and actions, and that language is a very powerful force for social change.

One thing is undeniable: A great deal of attention has been devoted in recent years to dealing with the complex semantic issues surrounding the delicate politics of race and gender, and to adjusting our use of terminology to suit changing sensibilities.

Tower of Babel

Humans have demonstrated a special capacity to invent, and use, racial epithets. Some terms that once seemed respectable have, over time, ended up becoming insults instead; and some that were intended as insults ended up being embraced, and used, by those groups.

For instance, “nigger” and “colored” once were considered progressive. In 1841, when John Quincy Adams referred to “negros and persons of color” in a legal brief, these terms were seen as merely descriptive. The same is true of the 1907 Slave Trade Abolition Act, which referred to “any negro mulatto, or person of color.”

During the Civil Rights era, “colored” gave way to “nigger,” then to “black,” which persists to this day. “Colored,” though dated, is enshrined as part of the NAACP acronym.

“Afro-American” sort of came and went, forever associated with big hairdos of the 1960s. But “African American”—part of a trend in which “American” is added on to the end of just about every group identity—thrive as the current flavor of choice, favored most generally by various published guides on language usage.

However, in an interesting twist, “persons of color” seems to be gaining renewed popularity. Has it really taken us more than 200 years to progress from “colored persons” to “persons of color?”

In a similar manner, “Oriental” has been replaced by “Asian,” although many institutions have divided that designation into a plethora of subgroups, including: Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Guamanian, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese.

“Indians” now refers only to people from India. There are Indian Americans, but American Indians are now “Native Americans,” although Native Americans still call each other Indians. And while identifying a Native American by tribal affiliation—such as Cherokee or Sioux—once was considered insulting, many guides now recommend it as preferable to the more general terms.

“Alaska Native” has replaced “Eskimo” and “Aleut,” and many guides recommend that it also be accompanied by a tribal affiliation when possible. However, the Association of American University Presses cautions that “native peoples of northern Canada, Alaska, eastern Siberia, and Greenland may prefer ‘Inuk’ (‘Inuit’ for plural).”

Meanwhile, whole books have been written about what might be called the “Hispanic; Latino; Latina; Chicano; Chicana; Mexican American; Puerto Rican; Cuban; Manito; Raza” controversy. No one seems to be able to come up with a term that will satisfy this broad constituency.

And, last but not least, there is “white.” Northwestern University’s “Ethnic Classification Summary”—which is representative of many language usage guides—defines white as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.” Some guides allow the use of “Caucasian,” “Euro-American” or “European American.” The U.S. government now classifies the entire group as “non-Hispanic white.” (“There is also a “non-Hispanic black” category.)

While this may provide more accurate information, it does seem a bit strange to define a majority of the population by what they are not.

The issue of gender in language usage is another area of great concern, particularly on college campuses. The goal has been to use “gender-neutral” or “nonsexist” language, which is intended to purge discourse of any sexual bias. In some languages this challenge is complicated by the assigning of sex to common nouns. Fortunately, English allows for a neutral gender in such cases, but that doesn’t get us off the hook.

In addition to now-familiar neutral terms like “fire fighter” (instead of “fireman”) or “mail carrier” (instead of “mailman”), words like “chairman,” “forefathers” and “freshman” must be addressed. (Recommended substitutions are: “chairperson” or “chair”; “ancestors”; and “first-year student.”)

College and government style guides provide lengthy charts showing the older wording alongside the preferred gender-neutral forms.

A tremendous amount of effort has been devoted to gender-neutralizing the use of pronouns as well—the use of “man,” “mankind” or even “human” to refer to people, or the classic bias toward the use of “he” and “his.”

The University of New Hampshire, in its “Guidelines for the Use of Nonsexist Language,” offers this gem: “Man, like other mammals, breastfeeding his young.” It is a beautiful demonstration of a sentence that is constructed correctly, from a strictly grammatical point of view, yet begs for some sort of modernization. The suggested alternative is: “Humans, like other mammals, breastfeeding their young.” That’s the most frequently used escape—switching
to plural. For example, instead of “Each student must bring his own supplies,” style guides counsel something like, “Students must bring their own supplies.” Thankfully, his/her and he/she seem to be falling from favor, although a number of guides still recommend their use.

The guidelines also recommend “parallel structure,” thereby avoiding any implied sexism in phrases such as “man and wife.” (The preferred phrase is “husband and wife.”)

For any editor, policy expert, college teacher or media figure, just keeping up-to-date on all of this can be daunting. A radio doctor recently voiced his frustration, and suggested that perhaps we should simplify matters by giving up the words “women” and “men” entirely and refer instead to “persons with ovaries” and “persons with prostates.” Of course, since this could draw the ire of people who have had their prostates or ovaries removed, it is an imperfect solution—but an entertaining one.

**“Indians” now refers only to people from India. There are Indian Americans, but American Indians are now “Native Americans,” although Native Americans still call each other Indians.**

The idea that the different races are somehow separate has taxonomic meaning. The idea that the different races are somehow separate kinds of people was discredited long ago.

Includes: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White; and Some Other Race. In addition, respondents are allowed to select more than one race when they “self-identify,” and can choose up to four different categories.

The Office of Management and Budget advises that “Hispanics and Latinos may be of any race,” so the census also offers two new “ethnic” categories: Hispanic or Latino, and Not Hispanic or Latino. “In the federal statistical system,” the official census Web site explains, “ethnic origin is considered to be a separate concept from race.”

With all the possible multi-racial permutations, this amounts to government recognition of some 64 different racial/ethnic designations. At last, Tiger Woods—who invented for himself the term “Cabinasiun”—meaning Caucasian, black, Indian and Asian—can fully “self-identify,” without having to disavow some part of his richly varied racial heritage.

Conservative columnist George F. Will decries this trend, and blames “people who make their living by Balkanizing American culture into elbow-throwing grievance groups clamoring for government preference.” In his 1993 book, “Culture of Complaint,” Robert Hughes, a senior writer for Time, wrote that although “polite white society” has repeatedly changed its mind about what to call black people, “for millions of white Americans, from the time of George Wallace to that of David Duke, they stayed niggers, and the shift of names has not altered the facts of racism, any more than the ritual announcement of Five-Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward turned the social disasters of Stalinism and Maoism into triumphs.”

Conservatives try to turn the whole matter into farce by concentrating on designations such as “differently abled,” and “physically challenged,” and even imaginary ones like “vertically challenged” (instead of “short”) and “living impaired” (instead of “dead”). Lengthy lists of these can be found all over the Internet.

The PC movement, to the extent that there really is such a thing, has definitely provided fodder for humorists—and ammunition for its opponents. In his book, Hughes chides liberals for their excesses, and wonders, “Where would George Will, P.J. O’Rourke, the editors of the American Spectator all be without the inexhaustible flow of PC claptrap from the academic left? Did any nominally radical movement ever supply its foes with such a delicious array of targets for cheap shots?”

Mock sympathy aside, Hughes may have a point. Even some on the left think that political correctness, though well-intentioned, may have gone too far.

For example, a quotation from Chaucer that includes the word “Niggardly” stirred a controversy at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, when a black student complained about its inclusion in a lecture. Obviously, her complaint resulted from the fact that it sounds like “nigger,” but there is no etymological connection between the two words. (Niggardly is defined as stingy.) Even so, there were many who insisted that its use was inappropriate, and that it would be best to avoid the word, and any others that might upset people.

In a similar vein, many colleges recommend finding alternatives to terms like “black sheep” and “blackmail,” and even advise against expressions like “a chink in his armor,” or “a nip in the air,” because of the possibility that their use might offend sensibilities.

The “one drop” rule

While everyone readily agrees that gender has biological significance, the fact is that race and ethnicity have no real taxonomic meaning. In other words, the idea that the different races are somehow separate kinds of people was discredited long ago. Unlike different species, which cannot produce viable offspring, human races interbreed freely, and frequently. It is literally impossible to tell where one race ends and another begins; such a differentiation would be fundamentally arbitrary.

Who is, and is not, African American? How much “blood” does one need in order to qualify?

The “one drop” rule is one prevailing legal standard. A dubious relic of the slavery era, its original intent is obvious. In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court, in Plessy vs. Ferguson, tacitly accepted that a person one-eighth black and seven-eighths white is legally black. But, even if this were a rational standard, how could such a thing be determined? How “black” does the relevant great grandparent have to have been?

Cornel West, a professor of Afro-American studies who recently made headlines by moving from Harvard back to Princeton, uses Clarence Thomas as a ready example of this conundrum. In his book, Race Matters, he points to Thomas’s “undeniably black phenotype.” Yet, he notes that the questions, “Is Thomas really black? Is he black enough to be defended? Is he just black on the outside?” were “debated throughout black America in barber shops, beauty salons, living rooms, churches, mosques and schoolrooms.”

Noting that Thomas made much of his African American heritage, especially by employing racially charged terms like “high-tech lynching,” in his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, West asks, “What is black authenticity?”

Of course, the same question could be asked about any racial category. Insisting that “blackness has no meaning outside of a system of race-conscious people and practices,” West advocates “replacing racial reasoning with moral reasoning, to understand the black freedom struggle not as an affair of skin pigmentation and racial phenotype but rather as a matter of ethical principles and wise politics.”

Ironically, conservatives are using similar arguments to attack affirmative action programs. They seem to be claiming that racism would disappear if we simply dispensed with all these fine racial distinctions and categories, stopped being so careful about our use of language, and just called ourselves Americans.

However, Cornel West—hardly an unflinching supporter of affirmative action—argues that in the absence of such programs, we quickly would see a return to the old patterns of white supremacy in both public and private domains.

We are far from being a colorblind society. It certainly can be a nuisance at times to deal with a barrage of ever-changing racial, ethnic and gender terminology—a steady stream of newer and better names for the myriad sizes, shapes, colors and other variations of humankind. But this may be a price we have to pay for the purposes of social progress, and simple civility. One of the main functions of PC language is to avoid inadvertently slighting or insulting someone by using a term they might find offensive. The easiest, and best, solution is simply to choose alternative words.

Language does have power. We use words to convey our thoughts, put intentions into action, and to persuade. While it is true that words have only the power we bestow upon them, we cannot rob them of their power by pretending that they are meaningless.

We should choose, and use, our words very carefully.
OLIN from page 1

engineering education, but also to challenge many long-held practices of traditional higher education in general.

Built next to Babson College, which specializes in management and business, Olin aims to turn out business-savvy engineers. It has a vice president of innovation and improvement. And to avoid the male-dominated “geek” culture of other engineering programs, at least half its students will be women. In an attempt to remove barriers to interdisciplinary cooperation,

there will be no academic departments (“We don’t want the chemists only to talk to the chemists,” spokesman Joseph Hunter said). There is no tenure. And Olin doesn’t charge tuition; each accepted student will receive a full four-year scholarship covering tuition and accommodations.

“If you look at tuition alone (at other universities), how much more can they increase it? The whole system is a house of cards that’s bound to collapse,” said Lawrence Milas, the outspoken president of the Olin Foundation. “We want to be the college that is constantly innovative, and we’re trying to organize ourselves and develop the kind of culture that will support that kind of innovation. And we can do it, because we don’t have people dug into their turf afraid or resistant to change. We can be risk-takers.”

There was enormous competition for 32 slots in the inaugural class. The school attracted more than 3,000 inquiries and 664 applicants; barely one in 20 was accepted. That made Olin one of the most difficult colleges in America to get into, even before it had a campus or a faculty or a library or a curriculum. All of these accepted students posted standardized test scores in the top three percent nationally, and had nearly perfect grades. Seventeen play at least one musical instrument. There are actors, athletes, dancers and debaters. One helped his parents build a geodesic dome-shaped house, and restored a vintage Volkswagen Bug while he was still in high school. They have enough computer knowledge to run a large company.

Their academic performance was so good, in fact, that the incentive of free tuition probably was not a factor in the decision of these students to apply, since most were offered full scholarships to engineering programs at some of the nation’s top universities and colleges. Nor were they necessarily swayed by the fanciful self-deprecating promotional campaign that used the genre of 1950s horror movie posters to advertise “The College That Doesn’t Exist!” They had other reasons for selecting Olin.

“Before I came, there was a slight bit of doubt, but that’s true no matter where you go to college,” said Jessica Anderson of Albuquerque, one of these first students. “When I came to the candidate weekend and I met the faculty, the administration, I realized they could be anywhere else doing anything, and also saw how passionate they were about making this place amazing. And I realized it couldn’t fail.”

Still, by the time of the scheduled opening day in late August 2001, things had not gone entirely as planned. Conceived by Milas in 1993, the school had received its charter from the state of Massachusetts in 1997 and had picked a 70-acre site on the wooded 370-acre Babson campus 12 miles outside of Boston. (Milas is a Babson graduate). The land was purchased from Babson for $15 million. The foundation had hired the college’s first employee in 1999; Richard Miller, who was lured away from his job as engineering dean at the University of Iowa to become president.

By March of 2000, however, construction had yet to begin because of design and permit problems; threatening plans to start classes in the fall of 2001; the first shovels-full of dirt wouldn’t be dug until August of 2000. Miller and his tiny group of administrators were working in the former bedrooms, and even attics and closets, of a few old Colonial-style homes that had come with the Babson property, looking out over the mud that was supposed to become their innovative campus.

But faculty already had been hired, and student recruiting had begun. Miller convened a meeting of what he called his SWOT team, which stood for “strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.” (If Olin has adopted one thing from traditional higher education, it is a fondness for acronyms, although it uses them with something of a sense of humor.) The group decided that opening on time was probably impossible, and agreed that the buildings weren’t the only things that would not be ready. It would take another year to test the curriculum.

So the SWOT team proposed that the inaugural class of students not take classes, but spend a year helping to design the classes they would eventually take. The students would be housed in temporary accommodations at no charge, and serve on committees with the faculty to plan the school’s curriculum. And they wouldn’t be called students. They would be called “Olin partners.” Miller said: “Nearly everyone who thoroughly thought about this was easily persuaded by the logic of it. It turns out to have been a major defining moment. We were doing something that was not in the plan. And let’s not overlook the fact that involving students in the design of the curriculum is itself heretical” in higher education.

It was these Olin “partners” who were milling around on the first day under the yellow-and-white-striped tent set up on the lawn of the wooden Colonial where the president’s office occupies an upstairs bedroom. They would spend five years here, not four, returning in their second year as freshmen. Some sported brightly hued hair, others conservative crewcuts. One, Matthew Hill, showed off his Frisbee skills, balancing a disk on a finger and tossing it beneath his leg. Another, Julianna Connelly, sang a song she wrote for the occasion; yet another performed a ballet solo. The wife of the vice president of external affairs sold commemorative T-shirts for $10 at a folding table. Balloons were anchored from cinderblocks, and there was the din of a bulldozer sculpting some dirt into what will become the entrance to the campus. Unlike similar scenes at other private colleges, there was no sense of history—except for history about to be made.

“Every one of these kids turned down a full ride to someplace else,” said Jim Poisel, whose daughter, Joy, was the valedictorian of her Indiana high school class and scored in the top one percent on her SATs before deciding to enroll at Olin. “If this doesn’t work out, she’s only 18 years old. I doubt her life will be over. There are a lot worse things you can do with your life than to come out here and be involved with this. We raised her this way,” Poisel, a firefighter in Indiana, added: “We told her life is a risk.”

How much of a risk is there really? “We have no alumni network, no campus, no track record,” said college spokesman Hunter. “There are going to be challenges. Failure is a possibility, if a remote one.”

Very remote, considering the fact that the Olin Foundation has pledged its entire substantial financial support to making the school a success.

Another pair of parents, Nancy and Ken Fredholm of Hudson, New Hampshire, bubbled over with enthusiasm. “My worst professor in college was tenured,” Nancy Fredholm said in a not-so-subtle nod to Olin’s system of five-year faculty contracts instead of tenure. “I’m so envious,” said Ken Fredholm, himself an engineer who remembers being educated in “large lecture halls, not like the kind of one-on-one experience they’re going to have here. If they had had this back then, I wouldn’t have had any hesitation about enrolling here.”

The modular buildings that will serve as temporary housing and offices were also behind schedule, and the students settled into temporary space at Babson. It would be two weeks before they could move their things into what they quickly dubbed the “Olin trailer park”: a parking lot and two flat-roofed buildings—bigger on the inside than they looked—which
included reception areas, laboratories, classrooms, kitchens with perpetually brewing coffee, and folding chairs and tables, all connected through a maze of hallways.

The students attended the usual round of orientation mixer. At Olin this included a visit to the New Hampshire home and office of entrepreneur and engineer Dean Kamen, the inventor of the scooter-like Segway Human Transporter, who showed them his collection of antique technological artifacts. From the college itself, each student got a Franklin W. Olin “baseball card” encased in Lucite as a keepsake.

Raised in Vermont, Franklin Olin had only one term of formal schooling after the age of 13, but was accepted by Cornell, where he majored in civil engineering and was captain of the baseball team. The founder of the Olin Corporation, he used his personal fortune in 1938 to establish a foundation, which has since given more than $300 million to build and equip 72 buildings on 57 campuses. Building and endowing Olin College is likely to eat up the remaining $500 million. “We said, If this thing succeeds, that’s exactly what’s going to happen,” said Milas, the foundation’s president. “And right now it looks as if it’s going to succeed.”

The school’s governing board, or President’s Council, came to the campus for a routine meeting the same weekend that the college opened. It is an impressive and influential group that includes John Abele, founder and director of the medical device company Boston Scientific; Stephen DiVittorio, dean of engineering at the University of Michigan and chairman of the National Academy of Engineering Committee on Engineering Education; Gregory Shelton, vice president for engineering and technology at Raytheon; Sheri Sheppard, professor of engineering at Stanford and an advocate for reforming engineering education; Lee Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; and William Wulf, president of the National Academy of Engineering.

Choosing to establish an engineering college, of all things, was a particularly risky proposition for the Olin Foundation. The number of accredited engineering programs has grown steadily, from 1,410 in 1990 to 1,602 in 2000. Yet since 1985, the number of engineering majors has declined by nearly 20 percent. “It came this way,” Milas said: “Okay, let’s start a college. And if we’re going to do that, why not an engineering college? Does America or the world need another engineering college? We discovered that there was an opportunity for a brand-new engineering college because, unlike the humanities and maybe some other fields of knowledge, science and engineering is a body of knowledge that is always growing and expanding.”

It is also true that the National Science Foundation, accrediting agencies, and other groups have been urging the reform of engineering education since the close of the Cold War by requiring instruction in team-building, communication and entrepreneurship, and by increasing the number of minority and women engineers. But at existing engineering schools, such reforms have been slow to be adopted. “Major business leaders have been asking for changes in what engineering students know when they leave school,” said Miller. “And they’re making progress, but the progress is really slow. It has been disappointing.”

Not that Olin has yet realized all its goals. Participants at an NSF-sponsored workshop for women academic engineers complained that it was likely to simply reflect the existing white male-dominated culture of engineering. And while nearly half of the students are women, Olin has been less successful in attracting a broad representation of minorities. Among the first group of 62 students (the 30 original “partners,” plus 32 more who will join them as freshmen next fall), there are 12 Asians, five Hispanics and one African American.

As Olin students and faculty fell into a routine, a supermarket-style newsletter began to circulate called OVAL, for “oddly verifiable approximations and leaks” — more engineering humor. It predicted that “the official opening of Olin College will prompt an earthquake that will cause large cracks in the engineering education establishment. There will be no serious injuries, only a few bruised egos.”

The first of a succession of five-week “modules” began next. It included the start of work to design the curriculum, plus student-faculty research projects and something called the Olin Challenge — the idea of a professor who believes in hands-on collaboration as an integral part of engineering education. The professor wanted the group to build the world’s smallest working bicycle; the students overruled him, pointing out it would be hard for more than just a few of them to take part in creating something so tiny.

They chose instead to build the world’s biggest Rube Goldberg device, designed to hit the snooze button on an alarm clock in 130 steps; the previous record was 113 steps. In the end, the project became a lesson not only in collaboration, but in Murphy’s Law, when only 124 of the 130 steps actually worked.

Construction of the campus, on the other hand, was going smoothly, helped by unseasonably warm weather. When completed, the distinctive collection of buildings on a hilltop will have 500,000 square feet of space, with 27 fully networked labs and classrooms. Each seat will have data and power ports, and two of the classrooms and most of the labs will have complete computer workstations for every student. Dorm rooms will be doubles with private baths and connections for power and cable television, telephone and data, plus fiber-optic outlets at each desk.

About 300,000 square feet will be completed in the long-awaited first phase, now scheduled to be finished this summer, including dormitory space for 195 students. It will take ten years for the school to reach its planned final enrollment of 600 to 650 students.

Olin College had 38 faculty and staff late last fall, but was adding more. The faculty will eventually number about 60. Three-thousand people applied for the first 15 advertised positions. Only three of those who were offered jobs declined them, two after being promoted by their current universities to discourage them from leaving, according to Miller. Olin has hired faculty away from MIT, Cornell and Vanderbilt; one, Stephen Holt, was director of space science at the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center. Another faculty member was a professor of mechanical engineering and director of the new products program at MIT, and former host of the PBS series Scientific American Frontiers.

Many faculty gave up substantial seniority to come here, and most agree with the idea that doing away with tenure is “a bulwark against mediocrity,” as one put it. The dean of the faculty is Michael Moody, who came from Harvey Mudd College, where he chaired the math department.

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Student Matthew Hill, shown working on his art project, looks forward to Olin’s first year of “real” courses.

Provost David Kerns was lured away from Vanderbilt, along with his wife, Sherri, vice president of innovation and research. Duncan Murdoch, vice president for external relations and enrollment, came from the University of Southern California.

When the second five-week module began, students were encouraged to undertake community service projects. Some collected used computers and refurbished them for low-income families. Others went to a nursing home for patients with multiple sclerosis and devised a way to install inline-skate wheels on the corners of their wheelchairs to help prevent them from becoming stuck against the walls. Two students were cast in the Babson College theatrical production of “The Real Inspector Hound.” Jessica Anderson and another student made the Babson Dance Ensemble, and two others joined Babson’s a cappella singing group. (Olin students also started their own outing, bowling, film, yoga and CD listening clubs.)

Olin’s relationship with Babson is closely tied to its mission. “It’s an ideal place to partner with because of our entrepreneurial experience,” said Babson spokesman Mike Chmura. “Babson business students will learn early how to work with the people who will create the products they will later help to market, develop, produce and sell. Likewise, Olin students can bring Babson students on board to plan the business aspects of selling the products they design.”

As a practical matter, Olin doesn’t have to build an athletic complex; its students will use Babson’s. And Olin students will use the Babson library for non-engineer-
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ing materials. Olin also pays Babson to provide dining, security and health-care services. Olin President Richard Miller serves on Babson’s board of trustees, and Babson administrators are members of Olin’s governing committees.

Holt encouraged a dozen students to enter a NASA competition to design a greenhouse that could operate on Mars. Matt Hill, the Frisbee fanatic, served as design team leader. The Olin proposal was named one of six finalists, beating out upperclassmen from Cornell and other large established universities. Olin’s team

There will be no
degree programs.
There is no tenure.

Olin doesn’t charge
full tuition; each accepted
student will receive a
full four-year
scholarship covering
tuition and
accommodations.

also created a tongue-in-cheek online radio show it called The History and
Mystery of Mars.

Around this time, students and faculty started to become disenchanted with one of the innovations Olin had proposed to make: shortening the segments of the academic calendar. The modules were proving frustratingly short, and there was a consensus that half-semesters (called “quasemesters”) also wouldn’t necessarily work. It was agreed that the curriculum would be taught in sets of three linked courses—called “corporations” and engineering design, for instance. A group of, say, 25 students would take all three of those courses together, and the instructors would jointly design the curriculum and projects to be complementary. Students would work on engineering projects that bring together the basic concepts of calculus and physics.

After the winter holiday break, students and faculty tested this idea. Their project: building a cannon that could fire a golf ball far and accurately, with a budget of $300. The two student teams were bested by the Babson student at the desk in the athletic center. But teams of high school seniors in plastic safety glasses were already at work just ahead, trying to find a way to build the longest cantilever, or projecting structure anchored at one end, out of Styrofoam, unharpened pencils, crepe paper, five-gallon water jugs, and file boxes. (“We didn’t have a box when we did it,” said Joelle Arnold, a member of the Olin partners class.)

Other Olin partners walked around dispensing advice and encouragement—and looking like they own the place. “The whole point is to introduce them to what Olin’s going to be: very project-based,” said Anderson. “We do own the place,” she added. “We have pride of ownership.”

Connelly took several “test courses,” including “Lepidoptera of Babokov,” which scrutinized the author’s moth and butterfly references, and “What I L.” a humanities course that looked at self-perception and pondered whether a computer can be an “L.”

Connelly added: “At times it has been frustrating when a faculty member gives an assignment to do something I’ve never done before and don’t know how to do.” Matt Hill said Olin felt more like a corporation than a college. “We don’t feel like students at all.” But he admitted: “I’m looking forward to the structure” of the coming academic year, when the courses will be for real. He is also looking forward to seeing the school’s enrollment grow from its initial size of only 30 students. “It’s nice knowing everybody, but it would be nice to still have people that you haven’t met,” he said.

Hill admitted to having gone to bed at five o’clock that morning. Student burnout and lack of sleep became significant concerns among administrators. The dean of student life even arranged a seminar in time management. “It’s been a baptism by fire,” said Connelly, who earned a perfect 1600 on her SATs and got all A’s at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Virginia.

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