The life and work of the college: Towards a history of Black Mountain College as an institution of progressive higher education, 1933-1949

by

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“I hope, earnestly, that your efforts to get adequate support for Black Mountain College will be successful. The work and life of the College (and it is impossible in its case to separate the two) is a living example of democracy in action.”
Excerpt of a Letter from John Dewey to Theodore Dreier, July 18, 1940

Introduction

Black Mountain College (BMC) was a progressive liberal arts college founded in 1933 in the rural Southern Appalachian town of Black Mountain, North Carolina. The College was forced for financial reasons to close its doors in 1956. Over the course of its short life as an institution, Black Mountain gained a reputation internationally as a center for \textit{avant garde} art, architecture, literature, music and dance. What is less well known about Black Mountain College is that its curriculum, organizational structure, and the core social justice values of its central faculty, were all based in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey.

I first heard about Black Mountain College as a high school student studying music, poetry and art history in Asheville, North Carolina, a small town just a half an hour drive west of the site of Black Mountain College. I learned that Black Mountain College had become famous as a retreat for artists like Franz Kline, composer John Cage, the architect Buckminster Fuller, poet Charles Olson and many others who, during the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century would give definition to the artistic \textit{avant garde} of the United States in the 1930s and 40s. By the time I learned about Black Mountain College it had long since closed down, and its grounds were being used for summer camps and various other events like the Lake Eden Arts Festival. One of my best friends at that time lived in the town of Black Mountain and even held her birthday party in the shadow of the former Black Mountain College “Studies Building” which had been designed by Bauhaus and
Harvard Architect Walther Gropius and built by Black Mountain students and teachers in 1941. Of course, when I was in high school, I associated names like Ginsburg or Gropius with big cities in New England or else distant West Coast locales like California, not humble Black Mountain, NC.

I would soon be initiated into the significance that BMC held for some teachers in my community. Upon attending the North Carolina State Governor’s School East, as a rising high school senior, I found that this publicly funded summer school program for academically gifted students in my State was doing its own homage to Black Mountain in the form of reenactments of the famous “Happenings”—simultaneous, improvised, creative productions across artistic genres performed live for an audience. You’ve likely seen some version of these Happenings produced somewhere as well, perhaps with a painter painting alongside musicians jamming away and maybe a poet clicking her fingers and reciting free verse. The artistic Happening with all of its Beat verve, novelty, and hipness survives intact even in its reproductions in the present day. And the Happening is just one example of a cultural artifact with its roots in Black Mountain College.

Another artifact of the arts at BMC is the Geodesic Dome. The first large scale model of the Dome was constructed on the campus in 1949, headed up by acting college rector, Buckminster Fuller. And Charles Olson, poet, critic and Black Mountain’s Rector in its final days, is credited with being the first person to apply the term “post-modern” to literature. Black Mountain College, and its contributions to art, culture and education in North Carolina was, however, by no means universally loved and accepted.

1 For a more detailed description of the original BMC Happenings, see Martin Duberman’s Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community (1972, p. 372-79).
When my grandfather, who grew up in Haw Creek, a small farming community between Asheville and Black Mountain, caught wind of my budding interest in BMC a decade ago, he recalled having been forbidden to visit the campus by his parents. My grandfather, who was a teenager during the heyday of the College in the 1940’s remembers being caught trying to sneak onto campus to attend a dance or go swimming in the lake there with his brother, and being severely punished for it by his mother, my great-grandmother. So, even as the institution was being celebrated in some circles, I learned very early on that Black Mountain College was also feared and reviled by many members of the community, particularly in my grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ generations.

Black Mountain College had no religious affiliation, unlike the neighboring Asheville Farm School, which had been founded by the Presbyterian Church (and exists in the present day as Warren Wilson College). Likewise early incidents such as the arrests of two unaccompanied female students for supposed prostitution (the students were hitchhiking), as well as the racial integration of the school’s Summer Institutes in 1944, must have cemented Black Mountain’s reputation in the minds of some locals as an institution for troublemakers and outsiders. BMC’s existence can still feel like something of an accidental blip in the larger cultural and social history of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

At the foundation of Black Mountain College there was a close affinity for the progressive educational ideals espoused by John Dewey. Dewey had become a kind of academic celebrity in the United States due to the popularity his specific brand of political philosophy, with its emphasis on education, had achieved in the opening decades
of the 20th century. Dewey was best known for his involvement with the progressive education movement in the United States, which called for a more radically student-centered approach to education. Dewey’s Philosophy of Education, which understood student learning in terms of “educative experiences” in finely tuned school environments, was in his own opinion, often misinterpreted, giving way to a proliferation of falsely “progressive” schools, particularly at the primary level. Dewey criticized these misinterpretations of his philosophy in a series of lectures published in 1938 as *Experience and Education*. And his support for specific school or educational programs was particularly hard-won. He had, however, developed a strong relationship with John Andrews Rice, the maverick Classics professor of Rollins College in Florida, who would eventually found Black Mountain College. And upon Rice’s request, Dewey ultimately joined Black Mountain College’s Advisory Council, a body somewhat removed from the daily life of the school, and involved in the fundraising work that kept its doors open.

In this essay I want to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of how some of the figures most central to the life and work of Black Mountain College sought to negotiate the differences that arose among their personal beliefs and orientations as teachers and scholars, the values held up by the college community as a whole, and the larger political realities of the community surrounding the college—my native Western North Carolina. I want to present this history, as much as possible against the backdrop of my own experiences as a student and teacher in Western North Carolina, and my own commitment to a progressive philosophy of education. Through their own ideological commitments to progressivism, and the educational philosophy of John Dewey, BMC founders such as John Andrews Rice and Theodore Dreier showed a strong desire to
create an institution of higher education that would influence the larger community of the
United States by preparing citizens for democratic participation in the politics of their
nation. Figures like Josef and Anni Albers who would exert a huge influence on the
culture of the College in the 1940’s, had experienced first-hand the destructive
possibilities of external pressure from political regimes upon institutions of higher
education, having worked at the Bauhaus in Germany during the rise of the Nazi Party
there. So, the Albers and other teachers at BMC would have had their own views about
how best to negotiate the relationship between the progressive politics of the college
community and the very conservative politics of the region where the college existed.

Black Mountain College is distinct as a progressive institution of higher education
in that it received the resounding endorsement of John Dewey, as in the statement in the
epigraph above, which Dewey sent to BMC Faculty member and Board of Fellows
Treasurer, Ted Dreier for use in the 1940 College Bulletin. My own archival research at
the North Carolina State Western Regional Archives in Asheville, centered on a
collection of 54 letters and telegrams, indicates that Dewey’s pragmatism was the
dominant philosophical framework upon which the rest of the organization and
curriculum of BMC was built. Further, my research shows that BMC was unique among
other so-called “progressive” institutions of higher education in that it received the clear
endorsement of Dewey himself. This is not to say that Dewey’s pragmatism was the only
set of ideas at work in the BMC community, nor should it imply that Dewey never
endorsed other colleges or college curricula. Nevertheless, because of its dominance as a
set of guiding principles during the 1930s and 40s, Dewey’s progressive philosophy
provides a substrate upon which the other ideas, structures and processes of BMC might be examined.

Ultimately, I hope this research will help me come to a deeper knowledge of an institution that was central to my early understanding of my own education. Since I first learned of Black Mountain College more than ten years ago, I have gained a lot of respect and affection for the characters that populated the campus in the 30s, 40s and early 50s.

As Martin Duberman and others have recorded, BMC was often a place of conflict. Through all of that conflict, nevertheless, Dewey’s progressive principles of autonomy and democracy remained as central BMC values.

**Historiography of Black Mountain College Studies**

Black Mountain College was founded 80 years ago this year by a group of professors and students who, after a protracted labor dispute with the President of Rollins College, in Winter Park, Florida, resigned in protest of the President’s actions. Lovejoy and Edwards document the entire affair in a report for a 1933 *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (AAUP). The title of the report sounds a familiar, contemporary note: “Academic Freedom and Tenure: Rollins College Report,” which I think also speaks at least indirectly to the relevance of this project to 21st century higher education.

So, even though it emerged from a less-than-auspicious beginning, Black Mountain College became renowned as a center for *avant-garde* music, dance, visual art, architecture and literature. And yet, just twenty-three years after it was founded, Black Mountain College, which had never secured an endowment, failed financially, and was forced to close its doors, though the legacy it has left in visual arts, literature,
architecture, and the organization of higher education has remained smoldering just below the surface of American popular culture for decades (see *Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center*, Online for exhaustive links to information on past exhibitions)².

Throughout it’s 23-year existence, Black Mountain College attracted faculty and guest lecturers as diverse as Albert Einstein, and William Carlos Williams, M.C. Richards and Max Dehn. Black Mountain was also a laboratory for many brilliant student minds like Robert DeNiro, Sr., visual artist and father of the well-known actor, sculptor Ruth Asawa, poets Robert Creeley and Ed Dorn, and writer and publisher Jonathan Williams. Many Black Mountain faculty also used the College as a kind of laboratory, and indeed a springboard for their later notoriety. Figures like the painters Elaine and Willem DeKooning, or the composer-choreographer duo, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, and even the architect Buckminster Fuller, who constructed the first large-scale geodesic dome on Black Mountain’s campus, were all relative unknowns in their respective fields prior to their tenures at Black Mountain College.

As such, the bulk of the existing scholarship on Black Mountain College deals with the College’s place in American art and literary history. *The Arts At Black Mountain College* is the most comprehensive such history to date (Harris, 1987). Author, Mary Emma Harris wrote *The Arts at Black Mountain College* on the basis of extensive research conducted beginning in the late 1970s as part of a research and preservation effort, which she still heads up, called the “Black Mountain College Project”.

² <http://www.blackmountaincollege.org>. The Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center (BMCMAC) is one of the organizations at the center of ongoing research and celebration of the history of BMC. These initiatives are primarily take the form of art exhibitions, public performances and lectures. The BMCMAC is also responsible for the annual research conference, “ReViewing BMC,” where I presented an unpublished paper on Buckminster Fuller’s philosophy of education in September 2012.
The Black Mountain College Project website and materials associated with it, which are now located in the North Carolina Western Regional Archives in Asheville, North Carolina include an invaluable compendium of student memoirs of Black Mountain College, since a large part of the ongoing work of the BMC Project involves the collection of first-hand student accounts of the College. While accounts of students’ experiences were not central to this investigation, they provide a necessary insight into the ways teachers’ ideas about education were put into practice. Brody’s *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, which was published to accompany a major Mexican exhibition of Black Mountain art and art history, expands upon Harris’ work, but is still primarily focused on art history. Mervin Lane’s *Sprouted Seeds* anthology (1990) has also been helpful in providing a more detailed account of the daily goings-on of the college from the perspectives of students. Likewise Michael Rumaker’s memoir *Black Mountain Days* is a beautifully written personal account of Black Mountain in the 1950s, but as it is chiefly focused on the later days of the College, it is mostly outside of the scope of this research.

Apart from these studies of Black Mountain College from art historical and student experiential perspectives, there have only been a few other studies that seek to present a picture of the institution as a whole. The most comprehensive and critically acclaimed study of the College to date is unquestionably Martin Duberman’s 1972 social history, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. Duberman’s exhaustively researched history is in many ways the inspiration for my own project. My research has benefitted not only from a close reading of Duberman, but also from examination of some of his notes and original interview transcripts which are also contained in the North
Carolina State Archives. Useful context and criticism for *An Exploration in Community* is provided by Lawrence Veysey’s review of Duberman (1973a). And Veysey, himself a prolific historian of higher education, has written extensively on the conditions which led to the emergence of institutions like Black Mountain College in the United States in the early 20th Century (Veysey, 1965; 1973b; 1981; 1982). Veysey’s work on the intellectual history of American colleges and universities is still central to the study of the history of higher education (Beecher, 2005; Horowitz, 2005; Loss, 2005a & b; Lowen, 2005; Reuben, 2005). As such, my readings of Veysey have been central to my framing of my own research on Black Mountain College in terms of intellectual history or the history of progressivism at BMC.

Several other essays and books have provided valuable ancillary perspectives on the history of Black Mountain College. Garren’s 1980 doctoral dissertation gives a useful picture of the first decade of the curriculum of Black Mountain College. Likewise, the founder of the College, John Andrew Rice’s memoir (1957) gives an interesting glimpse into the psychology of one of the central figures at BMC. Rudolph’s history of higher education, *The American College and University* (1962) was also an important, though less critical, more strictly documentary look at the time period and institutions covered in Veysey’s *Emergence of the American University*. Cremin (1961) places Black Mountain College within the larger context of the progressive movement in education in the United States, although his somewhat one-dimensional treatment of BMC as an institution engaged in arts education elides much of its uniqueness among its peer institutions, in terms of its anti-authoritarian organizational structure. One newer secondary source, which I have relied on as an inspiration for this project has been the
Journal of Black Mountain College Studies (JBMCS) which is edited by Brian Butler, a professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. While issues of the JBMCS tend to focus on individual figures from the history of BMC rather than the institution as a whole, the journal is a vital aspect of the Black Mountain College research community since it connects research and researchers across a variety of disciplines from art and music history, to literary criticism, to educational studies.

Historiography of John Dewey’s Influence at Black Mountain

When I first set out to study Black Mountain College and John Dewey’s influence there as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia in Canada, it was not at all obvious to me that I would be undertaking a historical inquiry. My academic background had previously been in English literature and linguistics, which is how I first became interested in what was taking place at Black Mountain College intellectually. Many of the poets that I admired so much and that I was reading so much of and so much about as an undergraduate were often connected at least peripherally to what is known as The Black Mountain School of Poetry. In my first job as a high school English teacher in North Carolina, I found it compelling (and, I think my students did too, to a degree) to introduce my classes to what I conceived of then as a fairly isolated, local phenomenon in 20th century art. It has only been recently since beginning my graduate study that a change has occurred in my conception of what had been going on at BMC.

Reading Robert B. Westbrook’s 1991 intellectual biography of John Dewey, I began to realize that the progressive movement in education was much more complicated than a one-to-one relationship between the ideas of philosophers and the work of
philosophically engaged teachers and administrators. Not only were Dewey’s ideas subject to rises and declines in popularity, but his ideas, the way that he wrote about them and the way people interpreted and acted on his ideas changed throughout his career and even after his death. As Westbrook notes, by the time of his death in the early 1950s, philosophy in the United States had taken a turn for the analytical. Dewey’s pragmatism had come to be seen as a relatively insignificant contribution to the field (Westbrook, p.537). Dewey was above all a human being, subject to errors of judgment and other contingencies. The beauty of Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy, and what is so attractive about it to me still, however, is that it allows for all such contingencies and errors as potentially valuable learning experiences.

So, armed with this new, more flexible conception of what progressive education was and had been, I began to wonder how this might have affected those individuals like the founders of Black Mountain College, who I was learning had held Dewey and his ideas in such high regard. It is here, in the midst of this line of questioning that I began to realize how history and philosophy depend on each other. Hayden White, the prolific historian and philosopher of history wrote in a 1969 essay, “The Tasks of Intellectual History,” about the urge that historians have had in certain epochs to move from what could be termed a more “historical” concern with what actually happened, to the more “philosophical” concern with what people thought was happening (Doran, ed., 2010, p. 81). And White further observed that such shifts in the general concern toward the status of ideas and thought are correlated with major cultural changes that undermine the dominance of existing authority. Thus, in the context of higher education, it is no longer sufficient to describe the events of the founding, flourishing and failure of Black...
Mountain College with a sort of detached scientific realism and attention only to the attested facts of what “happened.” To gloss the philosophical underpinnings of the foundation and organization of Black Mountain College from 1933 to 1949 as merely “progressive higher education” or even something more specific, say, a “Deweyan institution of higher education,” does a disservice to the complexity of the beliefs held by the members of the community there.

Once I began to conceive of my research in terms of intellectual history, my task became much clearer. While it is true that John Dewey was the most influential philosopher behind the curriculum and organization of Black Mountain College, intellectual history as a mode of inquiry allows me to dig much deeper into understanding of what figures like Rice, Dreier and Albers were doing at BMC by first digging into what they thought they were doing there.

Archival Sources at North Carolina State Archives

In addition to all of the secondary sources mentioned above, I conducted research into primary sources for this project during August 2012 at the North Carolina State Archives Western Regional Archive in Asheville, NC. My original research relies heavily on materials contained in the Black Mountain College General Collection as well as on the Theodore and Barbara Dreier Collection. I also made use of the Black Mountain College Project and Martin Duberman Collections, which were both created as part of previous research projects as I described above. Of greatest interest were the archival letters and other papers of John A. Rice, Theodore Dreier, and Josef Albers, as these were three of the most vocal exponents of the ideas behind Black Mountain College. My original
research will add to the historiography of Black Mountain College by detailing the connections between the educational philosophies, beliefs and political ideologies of John Rice, Josef Albers and Ted Dreier and the structure of the college they were largely responsible for creating, and maintaining. Both Rice and Dreier were founding members of the faculty, and Albers arrived soon after. All three men served as rectors (i.e. presidents) of the college. And Dreier and Albers were among the longest serving members of the community, both ultimately leaving the college in 1948 and 1949 respectively. It is primarily from the perspectives of these three men that I will trace the history of progressivism at Black Mountain College. Though they were sometimes at odds with each other politically, and though they are not fully representative of the BMC community in terms of disciplinary focus, ethnic background, social class or gender, they were among the most powerful voices of the College from its founding until 1949, a year which in many respects was the beginning of the final phase of the College’s existence (Duberman 1972). These three leaders of the College were among the three most influential in shaping the ideologies, which would in turn determine the College’s curriculum, its governance, and the wider impact it would have on American society.

The centerpiece of my original archival research into the Black Mountain College Collection at the North Carolina State Archives in Asheville, NC is a series of letters and telegrams exchanged between members of the Black Mountain College faculty and John Dewey. Altogether, I was able to uncover 54 such pieces of correspondence dated between April 18, 1936 and March 18, 1947. There is also one unsent letter from Theodore Dreier addressed to John Dewey and dated July 1947. This collection of correspondence runs the gamut of styles, formats and genres. Many of the letters are
formal notifications sent to Dewey regarding the state of the college, or news of his
election or re-election to the college’s Advisory Council. These letters, which appear in
the BMC Records, General Files Collection, are more likely to have been penned by
members of the faculty like Frederick Georgia, Frederick Mangold, or Robert Wunsch
serving in their various administrative capacities. But other letters—especially those
written by Theodore Dreier and John Rice, who were more personally acquainted with
Dewey—take on a friendlier, more intimate tone. The letters Dewey exchanged with
Rice and Dreier, though they deal chiefly with college business, are sprinkled with
references to family members, and are sometimes barely legible handwritten notes—as
likely to have been composed on board trains as at any desk—on scraps of what would
have been scarce wartime paper. The tone of the correspondence between Dewey and
Rice, and Dewey and Drier indicates that the relationship between the wizened Columbia
professor and his interlocutors in Black Mountain was something akin to a mentorship.
Rice and Dreier admired and looked up to Dewey, and often sought his approval, I think,
not only officially, in his capacity as a member of the college’s Advisory Council, but
also as something of a guru or ideological compass. I will not be able to parse each of
these letters in detail in this essay. If nothing else, the letters remain to be examined
more closely and analyzed as part of a larger future research project on the history of
progressivism in the education program at BMC.

*Dewey’s Progressivism*

For John Rice and Ted Dreier, the answer to the question of what they thought they were
doing at Black Mountain College would almost certainly have come chapter and verse
from *Democracy and Education* or else one of John Dewey’s other writings. And yet in hindsight, it is possible to see that what Rice, Dreier, Albers and the others at BMC were able to achieve went beyond and fell short of this Deweyan vision in certain ways. Nevertheless, in order to understand how BMC worked as a college and Dewey’s influence on its structure, it will first be necessary to take a closer look at John Dewey’s philosophy in more detail.

Dewey was most famous for his application of pragmatism, a political philosophy named after the Greek word for action, or *pragma*, to educational problems in the United States. The movement, which Dewey was at the center of, is generally termed progressive education. Progressive education called for a more radically student-centered approach to education. Cremin in his history of the progressive education movement, *The Transformation of the School* (1961), points out, I think correctly, that in many respects, the progressive movement in education in the United States was an offshoot of the wider progressive political movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which was partly a response to the new demands industrial capitalism was putting on labor. Dewey’s *magnum opus* on the topic of Education, *Democracy and Education*, perhaps the central philosophical text of progressivism in education, was published in 1916; nevertheless John Andrew Rice, and Theodore Dreier, two of the founders of Black Mountain College continued to use *Democracy and Education* as a guidebook for the foundation and administration of Black Mountain College. And Dewey’s personal influence, particularly on Rice, and Dreier cannot be overemphasized.

Dewey’s philosophy of education, which understood student learning in terms of “educative experiences” in highly controlled school environments, was, to his mind, often
misinterpreted, giving way to a proliferation of falsely “progressive” schools, particularly at the primary level (Dewey 1938). Dewey criticized these misinterpretations of his philosophy in a series of lectures published in 1938 as *Experience and Education*. And his support for specific school or educational programs was particularly hard-won. He had, however, developed a strong relationship with John Rice, and upon Rice’s request, Dewey visited the campus twice during its early years and ultimately joined Black Mountain College’s Advisory Council, a body somewhat removed from the daily life of the school, but which was closely involved in fundraising for the College. So, Black Mountain College, owed much to Dewey for his vocal support of the school, as in the letter quoted in the epigraph to this essay; but in addition to the intellectual clout that the association with Dewey brought the school, as a Professor Emeritus of Columbia University, Dewey was a well connected member of New York society, and Black Mountain definitely benefited financially from its close association with Dewey as well.

Rice, who was a Rhodes Scholar, but who had dropped out of the graduate program at the University of Chicago was a strict adherent to Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of education. Though Rice in his position as the founder, and later as Rector (or President) of Black Mountain College, was often able to capture the imaginations and enthusiasm of the wealthy donors upon which the College depended for support, he sometimes struggled to maintain that support, as he famously rejected out of hand the desire of some BMC supporters to guarantee certain results by the curriculum offered at Black Mountain. This indicates the importance to Rice of one of the foundational concepts underlying John Dewey’s educational philosophy, that is, his conception of aims in the context of education. For Dewey and ultimately for Rice, as the decisions he
made as Rector of Black Mountain showed, to delineate the desirable ends of some educational enterprise is tantamount to the curtailment of the educational process entirely.

As Dewey writes in Democracy and Education:

_Educators have to be on their guard against ends that are alleged to be general and ultimate. Every activity, however specific, is, of course, general in its ramified connections, for it leads out indefinitely into other things_ (109).

Dewey, in his above conception of ends in education echoes Charles Sanders Peirce’s “Pragmatist Maxim”:

_Conside what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object_ (quoted in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Pragmatism”).

In short, no concept can be understood without the consideration of all of its relevant effects. Thus to claim that, for example, the end of education is some specific \( x \) is not only to ignore all the other possible conceptions of \( x \), but also to foreclose on the possibility of the arrival, in the course of the process of education at some other end entirely (not \( x \) but \( y \), say). Thus the power of Dewey’s educational philosophy lies in its congruence with his larger political philosophy, stated elsewhere thus:

_Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith, which must be nurtured and made articulate: surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy_ (Dewey, quoted in Suissa 2006).

Here, Dewey describes the process of Education more generally in terms of power of intelligence, and the ends of education as “the projection of the desirable in the present.”
And here again, this is not a one-off comprehensive statement of ends, which Dewey is describing. On the contrary, Dewey’s “faith” is a faith in the power of intelligence to act *continually* as new evidence becomes available for it to act upon. The ends of education can never be decided once and for all. They can never be fixed, since this fixation would mean an end to intelligent consideration and evaluation of whatever end, and the adherence to that end not as a guide for inducing further intelligent action, but as a dogma ultimately limiting such action.

This constant reflection, coupled with intelligently directed action was indeed the basis for the general curriculum of Black Mountain College. Students had complete control over the courses they enrolled in, and would only submit to final examination when he or she felt ready. And contrary to popular belief, Black Mountain College was not exclusively an art school, but was a center of study across disciplines, from the social sciences to biology, physics, and mathematics. Only as the reputations of Black Mountain’s many famous artists in residence grew, and as money for hiring faculty in other areas became scarcer in the later years of the college did it become a more exclusively arts-centered institution. And although this was never the intention of Black Mountain’s founders, it is a direction that Albers and Dreier eventually began to push the College toward in the mid-1940s.

Even more diverse than the academic program at Black Mountain, were the varieties of other work, which needed to be done by students and staff in order for the College to thrive. Students’ lives at Black Mountain included much more than just study. There were always other projects and other work to be done, including farm work, textile work like the weaving of curtains, administrative tasks like college bookkeeping and
even the construction of the Studies Building designed and overseen by Bauhaus architect, Walter Gropius. That students would be expected to be involved in such a wide range of non-academic activities during their period of study at a University seems far-fetched in the present day. And it was an unusual arrangement even in the 1930s. But the effects that this relatively flat, decentralized organizational structure, in which every student and teacher was expected to contribute not only to the academic life but also to the manual labor which sustained the school was firmly rooted in John Dewey’s belief that educational experiences should never be artificially delimited.

*BMC’s Roots at Rollins College and Bauhaus*

I trace BMC’s lineage of Progressive thought from John Dewey first to John Andrew Rice and Theodore Dreier, who knew Dewey personally, and had the most extensive correspondence with Dewey in the BMC Archives. Rice’s wrongful dismissal from his professorship at Rollins College in Winter Park Florida, as detailed in Lovejoy and Edwards’ 1933 report to the AAUP, was the catalyzing event that ultimately led to the incorporation of BMC. And a small group of student and faculty “dissidents” from Rollins would be among the first students and faculty of Black Mountain College (Duberman 1972, p.12).

Among the Rollins faculty to step down in the wake of Rice’s dismissal was a young Physics professor from a well-to-do New England family, Theodore Dreier. Dreier was also enamored of John Dewey’s progressive ideals. Dreier was acquainted with Dewey from his childhood in New England and would later develop his own professional relationship with Dewey. Because of his connection to a wealthier stratum
of American society, much of Black Mountain’s administrative work in the area of fundraising fell to Dreier. But Dreier was also a dreamer—BMC’s “chief dreamer” as Rice would dub him (Duberman p.168). As Rice once commented, Dreier was “one of those strange creatures that the rich families produce every now and then; they want to repudiate the whole thing” (ibid. p.12). Dreier was among the longest serving BMC Faculty members, finally resigning in 1949 after a failed attempt to secure financial stability for the institution by orchestrating a curriculum shift towards the fine arts. Still, Dreier’s 16-year commitment to the success of BMC is more than evident in his collection of archival materials related to the work and life of the college.

Dreier’s accomplice in the 1949 attempt at transforming BMC from liberal arts into fine arts school was Josef Albers. Albers was another of the most influential faculty members at BMC in the ‘30s and ‘40s, who emigrated from Germany in 1933. Albers is an interesting figure in the history of BMC because he had received his training as a teacher and artist outside of the Progressive milieu of the United States. Albers had formerly taught visual art and design at the Bauhaus in Germany, but he was forced to flee the Nazi regime in Europe in 1933 with his wife Anni. Ultimately Albers ended up in Black Mountain, where he stayed and was central to the arts program until he moved to Yale to head the new Department of Design there in 1950. Albers, the consummate artist-teacher and refugee from Europe was not only a representative of BMC’s large expatriot community, but also, as Duberman and others have recognized, one of the most important and influential BMC faculty members despite his outsider status with respect to his background in American educational philosophy.
For the purpose of this preliminary research and analysis, I have taken these three men—Rice, Dreier and Albers—as ideological representatives of the Faculty of BMC during the period from 1933 to 1949. Rice was instrumental in guiding the initial group of students and teachers from Rollins to Black Mountain, and though he was uncomfortable with it, he wielded a great deal of authority and power as the central figure of the founding of the College (Duberman p.30). Rice’s influence eventually gave way in 1937 when he left BMC after his secret love affair with a female student was exposed (ibid. p.147). Nevertheless it would be impossible to understand the ideological foundations of Black Mountain without understanding Rice’s role in shaping those foundations. Likewise, Dreier, though he often took a back seat to Rice’s dominance in the BMC community since his personality was much less flamboyant, was no less influential in shaping the college community that he was so committed to. Dreier served as the Treasurer of the college’s Board of Fellows, the administrative body comprised entirely of BMC faculty for most of his 16-year tenure there. And Dreier’s records of his time at Black Mountain collected in the NC State Archives are extensive, comprehensive, and invaluable to the study of the College. Duberman tends to pass over Dreier’s importance to the BMC community, roughly glossing the 1930’s as the Era of Rice and the 1940s as the era of Albers. But behind both of these more outspoken leaders of the College was Ted Dreier, who, my research shows, played an invaluable role in the maintenance of BMC’s ideological center—that image which the College displayed to the public, including prospective students and donors. By focusing on the contributions of these three figures to the educational ideas in play at Black Mountain I will be able to approximate the ideological situation of the college from its founding in 1933 until 1949.
when the Albers left, leaving Rice’s ex-wife Nell as College Librarian and only founding faculty member still present at BMC.

Here it is of critical importance to note that the picture that the study of Rice, Dreier and Albers’ contributions to the ideological environment of BMC gives will necessarily be incomplete without consideration of all of the other people who surrounded them on campus. And for the purposes of this paper, the number of additional influences I will be able to take in to account will be very limited. For example, the wives of each of these men played important roles in the life and work of the college are not accounted for here. As previously mentioned, John Rice’s wife, Nell acted as the Librarian and made BMC her home for all but the final year of its existence. Likewise Anni Albers’ work in fiber arts was as ground-breaking as her husband’s work in color. Another important group that I will not be able to bring fully into consideration in this thesis is that of Black Mountains’ students.³

Another limitation of focusing in so closely on Rice, Albers and Dreier is that while I am interested in ideologies like racism and homophobia, which were at odds with the deeply held philosophical pragmatism of Black Mountain’s central figures during the 1930s and 40s, I will not be able to address these issues directly from the points of view

³Researchers like Mary Emma Harris in her *Black Mountain College Project*, <http://www.blackmountaincollegeproject.org/index.html> have worked extensively to procure interviews and other first-hand accounts of BMC from people who were students there. So, I feel comfortable deemphasizing students in this case since, in the context of Black Mountain College studies, there is a comparatively large literature concerning student experiences of the college. The scope of this paper will mostly exclude discussions of the influence which that’ beliefs and ideological orientations had on the curriculum and other structures of the college. However, especially given BMC’s progressive leanings, students were on much more equal footing with the faculty in terms of their ability to influence the structures of the college and the ideologies underlying those structures.
of people who bore the brunt of the racism and homophobia present at Black Mountain and in the surrounding community—people like Jack and Ruby Lipsey, who were the African American kitchen staff at the College during the ‘30s. Despite being at odds with core social justice aims of pragmatism, racism and homophobia were nevertheless present or even promoted (however indirectly or privately) by these central figures. Anti-racist and anti-homophobic voices were marginalized at times, as when a privately gay dramatics teacher, and BMC faculty member, Robert Wunsch, was forced to resign after being arrested in an anti-gay police sting operation in Asheville (Duberman p.92, p. 230-32). The Black Mountain College community tended to favor “safer” courses of action, particularly when the image of the college, which was situated in the middle of the very socially conservative, racially segregated region of the southeastern United States, was at stake. So, when democratic consensus could not be reached, the consequences were often bitter.

Yet in some respects, the Black Mountain College Community was uniquely self-consciousness. Hypocrisy was not suffered lightly. Students and teachers alike viewed their ideas and the decisions they made as relevant not only for their own small community, but to American society more generally. As was typical of BMC, in the 1940s when figures like Dreier and Albers, who had their own ideas about what BMC should become, were dragging their feet on the issue of racial integration of the college, more than a few students and other faculty resigned in protest (Duberman p.212-18). So, in a sense, Black Mountain College was something of a Utopian project in education. By this designation I wish only to signal Black Mountain’s more strict adherence to its own set of ideals, rather than the negative connotations, which the designation “Utopian” can
have—signaling and abandonment of practical concerns in favor of dubiously attainable goals. Black Mountain College as a community, lofty and Utopian as many of its ideas were, was always grounded by figures like Dreier with their practical concerns for being a working institution.

*Black Mountain College’s Foundational Texts*

In the following sections, I will analyze and give further context for a few of the foundational texts of the first 16 years of the life of Black Mountain College, paying particular attention to the differences in interpretation given by Rice, Dreier and Albers to the events that were unfolding around them and the educational program that was being enacted there. My analysis in this section will be organized primarily chronologically, so that Dewey’s BMC correspondence may be more easily brought in as a key context for understanding his influence. It is through this “dialogue with the past,” incorporating Hayden White’s conception of intellectual historiography discussed above, that I will show how John Rice, Josef Albers and Theodore Dreier were each grappling with John Dewey’s educational philosophy in different ways, and were each engaged in the challenge of acting upon these particular ideas in the context of the institution of higher education they were creating. Thus my analysis will show that Dewey’s influence on Black Mountain College extended beyond the realm of ideology—or what Rice, Albers and Dreier believed was best for the College—and into the realm of structure—those curriculum, governance and other practices which, when they were enacted by these three and other members of the community, determined the actual shape that BMC was to take.

*The Rollins College Report (1933)*
The founding of Black Mountain College was by no means a spontaneous event. Prior to 1933, John Rice and Theodore Dreier were colleagues at a small up-and-coming Liberal Arts College in Winter Park Florida called Rollins. But a small group of Rollins Faculty and students along with Rice and Dreier would ultimately leave that College as a result of a protracted dispute between Rice and Rollins’ President, Hamilton Holt. Rice issued a complaint to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an American professional organization that is still engaged in advocacy for academic freedom in American Universities. And in response to this complaint, an AAUP committee, headed by A.O. Lovejoy and A.S. Edwards, was tasked to conduct an inquiry into the events which led to Rice’s dismissal.

The committee found that while Rice had “unquestionably disturbed the harmony of the [Rollins College] community, and had seriously offended a number of his colleagues and other persons,” (p. 424) that his dismissal was not grounded in any matter “seriously reflecting upon either the private character or the scholarship of Mr. Rice” (p. 439). Indeed Rollins President Hamilton Holt’s dismissal of Rice (and the seven other Faculty members, who had sided with Rice in his public disputes with Rollins Administration) was a largely successful attempt at ridding the College of any voices of dissent that might challenge Administrative authority. Lovejoy and Edwards recognize that, “upon accepting the presidency, Dr. Holt, requested and was granted by the Board of Trustees, exceptional and extreme power and authority, which does not seem to have then been made known by that body to the faculty“ (p. 418). Likewise, Lovejoy and Edwards note that “the constitution of the College, as usually interpreted by the President, has been that of an autocracy, and with this there has been, at times, an excessive demand for
personal fealty to the head of the institution, as distinct from loyalty to its educational aims and principles…” (p. 419). Rice’s dispute with Rollins College was, at its core, a dispute over the university’s administrative structure.

However outspoken and charismatic he was, Rice’s criticism of the Rollins College administration and American education in general was not always completely fair or even justified. For example, at one point in the Rollins Report, Lovejoy and Edwards, in listing Rice’s public grievances make note of Rice’s argument that “a serious weakness in American education lay in an excessive feminization of its teaching body” (p.425). So, while Rice had surely been wrongfully dismissed from his professorship by Rollins’ autocratic and perhaps overzealous reformer, President Holt, Rice might easily have angered many of his women colleagues with the misogyny underlying such proclamations. Particularly in retrospect, given the troubling circumstances of Rice’s ultimate resignation from Black Mountain College, the institution he helped found, Rice becomes a much more divisive if not volatile figure, whose worldview was sometimes more regressive than progressive.

Nevertheless, Rice’s commitment to public debate, as evidenced in the Rollins Report indicates that even when Rice was ultimately wrong in his ideas, his presence was a catalyst for progressive change. Thus, even as Rice balked initially at the idea of founding a new college in the wake of the Rollins fracas, as Duberman refers to it, his colleagues, like Theodore Dreier, who had been a young assistant professor in Physics at Rollins, were willing to sacrifice their own jobs to support such a venture.

Unlike Rice, Frederick Georgia and Ralph Lounsbury, who were dismissed from Rollins and would later teach at BMC, Dreier would resign in protest of the Rollins
administration’s actions (Lovejoy & Edwards, p. 416). Dreier’s job may have been saved because his aunt, Margaret Dreier Robins sat on the Rollins Board of Trustees (Reynolds, 1997, p.4). This gives Dreier’s decision to resign a more potent moral valence. I think Rice recognized this about Dreier and came to value his intellectual contribution to Black Mountain College more highly as a result. Likewise 34 Rollins students dropped out in protest of Rice and the seven other professors’ firings. And many of these students ultimately joined the student body of BMC. So, while not everyone in the initial BMC class of 1933 would have agreed with Rice, most if not all of them sided with him and Dreier on the central issue of the Rollins College affair—namely that the college administration had egregiously abused its power, and that curriculum decisions ought to rest primarily in the hands of teachers and students.

The earliest direct correspondence between John Dewey and a member of the Black Mountain College community that I was able to uncover in the North Carolina Archives is dated three years after the founding of BMC. I was unable to find any direct comment from Dewey on the Rollins fracas; nevertheless, given Dewey’s later support for BMC and the close friendship and mentorship that developed between Dewey and Rice, it is likely that Rice would have had a supporter in Dewey. Certainly Dreier, whose wealthy New England family had been acquainted with the Deweys since Dreier’s youth, could have counted on Dewey’s support of his principled resignation from Rollins in the wake of Rice’s termination. But aside from the friendly support Rice and Dreier might have sought from Dewey, Dewey’s philosophy of education, rooted as it is in values of autonomy and democracy, clearly supported their cause.
In her 1997 article in *Education and Culture* entitled “Progressive Ideals and Experimental Higher Education,” Kathryn Reynolds devotes a few paragraphs to the 1931 Conference on Curriculum for the Liberal Arts College. This conference was held at Rollins and was chaired by none other than John Dewey. In his remarks at the conference, Dewey demurred from direct engagement with questions of governance that would flare up at Rollins in ensuing years. He chose instead to speak of his experience as a parent of two college-age children (Rollins College, “Curriculum Conference Proceedings,” 1931, cited in Reynolds, 1997, p.1). Dewey’s role at this conference was, I think, characteristic of his role in academia late in his career and in his life—that of a kind of figurehead or spokesman for progressivism in education. The ideas Dewey would have been promoting were not at all new. So, as Reynolds alludes to in her article, Dewey’s appearance at this conference is most significant in the opportunities it would have presented for professional networking. Specifically, John Rice was in attendance. And this was likely the first time that Rice had a chance to meet Dewey, with whom he would have a lengthy correspondence over the course of the ensuing two decades. Also of note is that the wealthy Rollins professor, John Forbes, who was a close friend of Rice and an early financial backer of BMC, was instrumental in arranging for Dewey to appear at the Rollins conference in 1931 (ibid. p.3).

No other account of Black Mountain’s history mentions this conference at Rollins. Even Duberman’s history of BMC excludes an account of the conference Rice provided to him in a 1967 interview (J.A. Rice, 1967, cited in Reynolds). The conference was geared towards college administrators, and Rice was not an official attendee. But even the fact that Rice would have gone out of his way to listen in on Dewey’s remarks to
the assembled luminaries of Progressive College Education—figures like Sarah Lawrence College President, Constance Warren, and Arthur Morgan, president of Antioch College—indicates that the question of the organizational structure of institutions of higher education was already on Rice’s mind. Perhaps even more than Rice’s falling out with Hamilton Holt and the ensuing fallout at Rollins, this 1931 Conference for Curriculum was the watershed moment that planted the seed of the idea of a new college model in his mind.

Preliminary Announcement (1933)

As Kathryn Reynolds emphasized in her 1997 article in Education and Culture, once the decision was made to proceed with the founding of a new College, and a suitable location was found for the campus on the grounds of a Christian Summer Camp in Western North Carolina, Theodore Dreier with his family ties to the moneyed New England upper-class, quickly went to work organizing and fundraising for the new educational venture that would become Black Mountain College (p. 4). Here, Dreier’s ideological commitment to BMC stands out since his resignation from Rollins had not taken effect even as he began touring the United States in support of the new College (ibid.).

In a letter Dreier wrote Rice in July of 1933, just three months before BMC Fall classes were due to begin, Dreier explains that in an effort to streamline his promotional efforts, that he had penned a “preliminary announcement” which could be copied and distributed to potential students, parents, donors or anyone else interested in what was in store for the new College. In his letter to Rice, Dreier is careful to sound a note of deference to Rice’s plans for BMC, stating:
I am enclosing a copy for your criticism or comment, as we ought to make sure we are all telling the same story, though of course this is simply my own statement and is not being sent out as an official statement of the group. From what I’ve heard, from one or two students, a coherent, written statement of some sort is rather desirable at this time, especially in helping to persuade the parents (Letter to John Rice, 1933, July 19).

While the mimeographed copy of the announcement Dreier refers to here does not survive in the archive, the University of North Carolina at Asheville Special Collections Library contains a document, likely a later version of Dreier’s own announcement, which outlines everything from tuition to application procedures, to a list of faculty. Interestingly, this document has “Josef Albers, Art” perhaps surreptitiously added in by hand at the top of the list, since he was a latecomer to the BMC Faculty that year (BMC 1933). The document begins: “Because of delays in printing a catalogue, the following preliminary announcement is being sent out in mimeograph form” (ibid.) And while no direct mention of Rollins is made, the first two pages of this four-page document consist of a prose explication of the “serious difficulties” and “great advantages” of starting a new college. However, in a decidedly Deweyan jab at Rollins, the announcement continues:

*By starting de novo, it will be possible to avoid some of the mistakes to which colleges of long standing are committed. It will also be possible to draw on the experience of other colleges, while, at the same time, trying out new methods in a purely experimental spirit* (BMC 1933, emphasis added).

‘Experience’ and ‘experimental’ are distinctively Deweyan by-words, which the author(s) of this preliminary announcement, include not only to signal what would have been a common experience of Rollins’s failures as an institution of higher education, but also to demonstrate Black Mountain’s commitment to the letter of Dewey’s principles of
progressive education, with their emphasis on individual experience as the starting point for learning and reasoned change.

The author(s) of this preliminary announcement go on to describe in detail the specific administrative structure that they hope to enact at the new college:

… The faculty and students who form the nucleus of Black Mountain College have decided to discard the non-professional Board of Trustees, substituting for it a Board of Fellows drawn primarily from the faculty. There will also be no president in the usual sense... the office will be held in rotation by members of the faculty (BMC 1933).

This ambitious new democratic structure for the administration of a college was unique to BMC, and to my knowledge has not been repeated on such a scale since. It would mean that teachers, in addition to their classroom and other responsibilities on campus, would also be taking on administrative tasks like bookkeeping, fundraising, hiring of new faculty and student admissions on a rotating basis. This commitment to a radically more democratic organizational structure for the new Black Mountain College would last until the bitter end, despite a list-ditch effort led by Dreier and Albers to alter it in the late 1940s. This attempt ultimately led to the Board of Fellows voting to remove Dreier, who had been on an extended leave of absence, in 1948. Josef and Anni Albers would leave the following year. But it was this radically democratic structure that would attract some of the world’s most visionary artists and teachers to this tiny town in rural Western North Carolina for more than two decades. It was also this structure which would allow the BMC community to move forward on issues of racial integration in the 1930s and ‘40s—decades before such attempts would be made at larger, more established colleges in the southeastern United States. It was ultimately John Dewey’s principles of progressive
education that were at the foundation of these radical organizational structures, which were adopted by BMC’s founders.

*The Dewey Correspondence 1936 through 1937*

During the first five years of Black Mountain College’s existence, things went remarkably smoothly. Of course finding enough money was always a problem. It was the height of the Great Depression in the United States and despite Rice, Dreier and Albers’ best efforts, BMC had never managed to secure more than minimal financial support for their new experimental Progressive institution. A budget drawn up by Dreier in the first year of BMC totaled $32,000, with staff salaries totaling less than $2000, excluding Albers’ salary of $1000 annually, which was supported separately by an individual benefactor (Duberman, 1972, p.71). In these early years there were none of the scandals or disputes that would plague the community later on in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Furthermore, the college’s system of governance appeared to be working. And efforts at self-sustainability were taken on unflinchingly. A student-run cooperative store was set up on campus as well as a print shop and a cottage school for the community’s youngest members (ibid.). In addition to their academic work, students engaged in projects ranging from the staffing of the various cooperative enterprises set up on campus, to the manufacture of bookshelves, curtains and other furnishings for campus buildings. These activities helped supplement the goods available to them on the campus they were leasing from a Christian group, which used it for a summer camp for just a few months each year.
Among the highlights of these early years of the college were two visits by John Dewey, who in 1936 began serving officially as a member of BMC’s Advisory Council. Both of Dewey’s visits took place during the 1934-35 school year. It is unclear from the correspondence I found in the North Carolina Archives whether or not Dewey ever visited the campus again. But these two early visits set a precedent, which caused BMC faculty—especially Rice and Dreier—to request future visits, which always seem never to have quite worked out (e.g. Dreier [to Dewey] April 6, 1938; Dewey [to Dreier] April 13, 1938). In one of the oldest Dewey letters in the BMC General Collection of the North Carolina Archives, which is handwritten on Columbia University Department of Philosophy letterhead, Dewey expresses his regrets at not being able to pay Rice and the others at BMC a visit during the fall of 1936. He writes of postponing his planned visit until the spring, “when I hope to see the countryside and the flowers at their best” (Dewey [to John Rice] October 29, 1936).

Students and teachers alike recalled Dewey’s 1934-35 visits fondly. Some students were perhaps disappointed by Dewey’s quiet manner. In spite of his notoriety, he was certainly not such an outspoken or inflammatory character as was Rice, for example. According to one student who met him then, Dewey was mostly a quiet observer and “gently discouraged efforts to treat him as The Great Philosopher” (Martin qtd. in Duberman, 1972, p.94). Dewey clearly showed some affection for Rice, making a point to attend his classes in philosophy and classics every day during his visit. And if Dewey admired Rice’s work, the feeling was definitely mutual. Rice gushed in his memoir that Dewey was the only man “completely fit and fitted to live in a democracy” (Rice, qtd. in Duberman, p. 94). Dewey with his calm wisdom seemed to prefer to
interact with BMC students informally outside of classes, sometimes joining them for a beer in the evening. And according to Rice, Dewey, who during one of his visits was accompanied by his friend, the art collector, Albert Barnes, was known to enjoy a drink of whiskey before dinner with members of the faculty (ibid.). So, while BMC was no Columbia University, Dewey appears to have felt at home there. Duberman rightly connects the success of Dewey’s early visits to the College with his agreement in 1936 to serve the college as a member of its Advisory Council. But even though Dewey may never have visited Black Mountain again, he would remain a vocal promoter of the college, and one of the highest-profile members of the BMC Advisory Council through the late 1940s.

Rice, in his position as spokesperson and sometimes Rector of BMC, initiated much of the early official BMC correspondence with Dewey. Their friendship had developed greatly since they met at Rollins in 1931. Unfortunately, much of Rice’s personal correspondence in the J.A. Rice Collection of the North Carolina Archives is still restricted and was thus unavailable to me for this research. The restrictions Rice placed on access to his papers during this period likely stem from the thorny conflicts that eventually arose between him and others like Dreier and Albers in 1937 when Rice finally left the college he had worked so hard to help found. The earliest of Rice’s correspondence with Dewey that is available in the Faculty Files of the BMC Collection comes in 1936, the year after Dewey’s precedent-setting twin visits to the College, and the same year he joined the Advisory Council. This earliest available *communiqué* is a telegram Dewey sent to Rice on January 23, 1936, inviting Rice and his wife to dine with Dewey at his home in New York City (Dewey, J. Letter to John Rice). And these
telegrams and letters, even though they were clearly part of official college business include personal touches like Dewey’s asking after Rice’s family.

In his April 16, 1936 letter to Rice, Dewey admits a little wistfully that he no longer has many contacts with schools. This is perhaps indicative of slump in interest in Dewey’s philosophy of education and his fading notoriety. But on the other hand, Dewey’s letters of this early period in BMC history also have a marked excitement about them. Dewey, who was to fully retire from teaching in 1939, seems to have relished the new role he was taking on as an “advisor” to BMC. And there was probably no one better suited to that role in the minds of Rice, Dreier and Albers. BMC had been purposefully in direct alignment with Dewey’s educational ideals of democracy, autonomy and a theory of learning centered on individual experience.

In an exchange beginning October 5, 1936, Rice makes this request of Dewey:

> You will remember that you said to me once that some day you would overcome your laziness sufficiently to have a look through your library. When or if you get a chance to do so, will you keep your eye open for odds and ends of books by John Dewey? We have in the library those on the enclosed list [Schools of Tomorrow, Democracy and Education, Experience and Nature, How We Think (2 copies), My Pedagogic Creed, and The Quest for Certainty] and would like to have a complete set (Rice, [to Dewey] 1936, October 6).

Here again Rice is not at all shy about expressing his admiration for Dewey and his work. Dewey had only just joined the Advisory Council when Rice made this request. And this is just the first attested instance of BMC benefitting materially from its association with Dewey.
Rice’s Fundamentalism and the Higher Learning (1937)

In December 1936, just a few months into John Dewey’s first term on Black Mountain’s Advisory Council, Rice had an essay published in Harper’s Monthly Magazine (Rice 1936). Earlier that year Louis Adamic’s widely publicized Harper’s article “Education on a Mountain,” had uniformly praised Rice, leading to some characterizations of the popular account as having “saved Black Mountain College” (Duberman, p. 119). But Rice’s article in the magazine, surprisingly makes no mention of his association with Black Mountain College; although this may have something to do with the fact that at its core Rice’s article comprised a criticism of Robert Hutchins, the educational reformer, then President of the University of Chicago, whose book, The Higher Learning in America had been published earlier that year and was highly critical of progressivism in education (Cremin 1961, p.325 and p.385).

In his article, Rice links Hutchins’ strongly avowed religious beliefs with his promotion of a “great books”-style curriculum. And Rice, taking up the mantle of Dewey’s progressivism, makes clear that he is highly critical of any curriculum which devalues an individual’s experience of the world around him or her in favor of the received wisdom of tradition. Rice, a Classicist by training, does not mince his words, writing, “To nothing has reverence been paid more stupidly than to the classics” (Rice 1936, p.590). Rice continues:

We do not read [the classics] as tracts for the times, which is what most of them were, but as distillations of pure reason...(ibid.).

Rice’s critiques of Hutchins’ modern day devotion to medieval and ancient European literature come in along four very distinct lines. First, Rice’s criticism is anti-
authoritarian, second it privileges individual experience, third it takes a position contra
the prevailing logical positivism of the day, and fourth it makes a very deliberate appeal
to American exceptionalism. These are all characteristic of John Dewey’s writings on the
philosophy of education, even to the particulars of how Rice defines experience; though
Rice delivers these arguments with a certain pique and flourish that is his own. In a
brilliant turn that I think best distinguishes Rice’s particular brand of educational
philosophy he writes:

Meanwhile, the poets have the best of it. But even though the poets have told
us nearly all we need to know about life, we cannot understand what they
mean except by living... Education, instead of being the acquisition of a
common stock of fundamental ideas, may well be a learning of a common way
of doing things, a way of approach, a method of dealing with ideas or
anything else. What you do with what you know is the important thing (ibid.
p.595).

Of critical importance in this passage is the word ‘may.’ Rice very consciously leaves
room for his readers to decide on their own method without resorting to hard and fast
proscriptive curriculum. And in this regard, Rice’s philosophy betrays a fifth Deweyan
impulse or affinity—in his conceptions of the aims of education as fluid, subject to
contingency and the specific situation of the individual whose education is being
discussed.

So, despite his abrasive personality, stubbornness, and wrong-headed opinions
about gender, sexuality and race, when it came to education Rice remained fully
committed to Dewey’s philosophical principles of democracy rooted in personal freedom
and individuals’ capacities for creativity and rationality. Even though Rice’s fervent
commitment to Dewey’s progressive educational philosophy was, by all accounts, the
driving force behind the founding of BMC and much of its early success as an institution, his influence would fade along with his friendships with Dreier and Albers. But in Rice’s absence Dreier’s relationship with Dewey would grow closer, as would Albers’ willingness to adjust his own educational philosophy to better fit the progressive mold. While I have uncovered no clear evidence that Dewey visited the BMC campus again after 1935, the influence of his philosophy there would continue to grow throughout the ensuing decade.

_Albers Evolution_ (1934 to 1940)

Next to John Rice, Josef Albers is probably the name most closely associated with Black Mountain College. He had already gained a reputation as a great artist and teacher at the Bauhaus, a cutting-edge school of architecture and design in Germany. But under pressure from the Nazi government the Bauhaus closed in 1933. Albers’ wife, Anni had been a student with him at the Bauhaus. She would become well known for her textile art. And Anni Albers was also Jewish. So, soon after the Bauhaus closed, the Albers decided to flee to the United States. Rice hired Josef Albers as BMC’s first art instructor on a hunch without even meeting him. And when he arrived in North Carolina from New York for BMC’s 1933 fall term, he spoke very little English at all (Duberman 1972, p.41-42). But neither the language barrier, nor Albers’ initial status as an outsider in the American progressive education milieu, prevented him from having a profound impact on the BMC community.

There is no direct correspondence between John Dewey and Josef Albers in the North Carolina Archives. This is no doubt in part due to Albers English language ability, which improved dramatically over the course of his tenure at Black Mountain. But
interestingly, there are several references to Albers in the Dewey correspondence, which provide insight into his understanding and interpretation of Dewey’s ideas as they came to be enacted in the daily life of BMC and its curriculum.

In 1934, for the Black Mountain College Bulletin 2, Albers penned a short essay entitled “Concerning Art Instruction.” Presumably, since Albers was still in the process of learning English, he received at least some assistance from someone else in the community. But Albers is the only named author. The purpose of the piece, like the other BMC Bulletins, is to provide a window into the college community for prospective students and supporters. Bulletin 2 is a fascinating artifact of Albers’ educational philosophy during his first years at Black Mountain. In the piece he describes the Bauhaus concept of Werklehre, which he (or possibly his ghost editor) glosses as “design with material” and later, “a forming out of material… which demonstrates the possibilities and limits of materials” (Albers 1934, p.5). The piece may well have been written in part to impress its audience with the novelty and rigor of a new-sounding mode of art instruction with its distinctively German jargon. But alongside its sometimes-difficult explanation of Werklehre, and art instruction at BMC more generally, Albers drops a few hints about his orientation towards a specifically progressive philosophy of education.

First, after quoting Delacroix and Rembrandt, Albers emphasizes the dialectical tension that is the point of departure for his own aesthetic and educational thought. He writes that:

...In fact all creative work moves between the two polarities: intuition and intellect, or possibly between subjectivity and objectivity. Their relative importance continually varies and they always more or less overlap (p.2).
This bears a striking resemblance to the idealist kernel in John Dewey’s pragmatism.

Although, Albers was probably more comfortable rooting his educational philosophy in the tradition of German Idealism than Dewey who explicitly rejected it, as a teacher Albers was less of a theorist than Rice, and much more of an artist.

Albers also explicitly characterizes art education as an experimental practice initiated by learners and supported by teachers:

*From his own experience, the student should first become aware of form problems in general, and thereby become clear as to his own real inclinations and abilities... Many years’ experience in teaching have shown that it was often only through experimenting with the elements in various distinct branches of art that students first recognized their real abilities* (ibid., p.3).

In the context of all of the heady discussion of *Werklehre*, this emphasis on experimentation and learning from experience reads like another implicit nod to Dewey, who published his book, *Art as Experience*, that same year.

That Albers happened to use the words ‘experience’ and ‘experimentation’ in the 1934 BMC Bulletin is unremarkable, especially considering the likelihood of Rice or Dreier’s having assisted with the translation of Albers’ thoughts from German into English, which he had only been studying for a year. But what *is* interesting is how well Albers’ ideas about education, which he had developed at the Bauhaus—like *Werklehre*—seemed to mesh with the American pragmatist framework that was central to the ideological foundations of BMC set up by Rice, Dreier and others. As is evident in his later writing, Albers quickly became much better versed in the Deweyan idiom of educational philosophy, especially when he was addressing groups of progressive
educationalists. But even as the way Albers spoke and wrote about his teaching changed significantly, his actual teaching methods seemed to change much less so.

In his February 17, 1937 letter to Dewey, Dreier writes that he has enclosed an article by Albers for Dewey to read. Albers has expressed interest in publishing it in the *Atlantic Monthly* or possibly the *Yale Review*. But Dreier is skeptical writing:

*I think that unquestionably, the language is still not good enough, although it is difficult for those of us who see Mr. Albers all the time and are used to his ideas and language to judge... Mr. Albers wanted you to see this one and get your comments* (Dreier [to Dewey], 1937).

So, unquestionably, Albers’ writing at this time is being edited with progressive educational philosophy in mind. A short 1935 piece by Albers was published in the magazine, *Progressive Education*, with the same title as Dewey’s book of the previous year, “Art as Experience,” though it makes no explicit mention of Dewey or his philosophy (Albers, 1935). The article, which is preserved in Dreier’s papers, amounts to little more than an advertisement for Black Mountain College. Compared to other more detailed expressions of Albers’ teaching philosophy from this time period, it is spare, and relies heavily on pat descriptions and oft-repeated “dogmas” of the BMC community. In a footnote, the editor of the magazine takes great pains to apologize for Albers’ idiosyncratic English. But compared to Albers’ other writing, this piece lacks authenticity. Perhaps in an attempt to translate his ideas about art and education into the language of American progressivism, or in an attempt to be a spokesperson for BMC, Albers seems to have abandoned those aspects of his personal philosophy of education, which distinguished it from the crowd. There is no mention of *Werklehre* in this piece, or any of the more exacting discussion of teaching method, which make some of his other
writing about education unique (e.g. Albers 1938, April 29; Albers 1940, June 12; and
Albers 1945, October 6). This 1935 publication may have been part of the reason why
Dreier sought Dewey’s editorial advice on Albers’ later essay. Then again, Dreier could
hardly have been disappointed by the interest generated for BMC by such a publication,
simultaneously echoing the title of John Dewey’s book of the previous year while serving
as an advertisement for Black Mountain. So, Albers 1935 article, as brief as it is, has to
be read as a statement of his own individual experiences, an expression of his personal
philosophy, as well as a report on the state of the BMC community as a whole, and a
glimpse of the ideology undergirding the community as a whole. Of course it would be
convenient and simpler if all of these possible readings converged and resonated with
each other naturally, but in fact Albers’ teaching philosophy as an individual differed
from those of his colleagues. Dreier (and probably Rice, too), as Albers’ editor, and as a
spokesman for Black Mountain College, nevertheless saw some value in promoting BMC
as a progressive institution, operating under the auspices of Dewey himself, whose
teachers were all on the same philosophical page. Albers’ as well as Dreier and Rice
believed that the life of Black Mountain College depended upon their ability to brand it
as a uniquely progressive, democratic and ultimately Deweyan institution. And they
seemed willing in the case of some of Albers’ early publications in English to sacrifice
some quality of scholarship to that end.

The Dewey Correspondence in the ‘40s

Dewey’s correspondence with Black Mountain College faculty continued uneventfully
through the 1930s, as Europe became embroiled in World War II. Requests for Dewey to
return to BMC continued to be gently and politely declined. As in this instance, when the aging Dewey seems to have forgotten how many times and how recently he had visited:

Dear Dr. Dreier, I had not the faintest idea that another year would go by without my getting to Black Mountain—I always enjoy my visits so much  
(Dewey [to Dreier] 1938, April 15).

Vague pleasantries such as the above seem to imply that Dewey visited more than the two times that Duberman alludes to. There is, however, no concrete evidence in his archived letters to support this. More likely, Dewey, who was already in his 80s and still so closely tied to BMC through his role on the Advisory Council had just lost track of the years since he had last actually visited in 1935. But in 1939, when his first three-year term as a member of the Advisory Council expired, Dewey happily accepted election to a second term (Mangold [to Dewey], 1939, June 1; Dewey [to Mangold], 1939, June 15; Mangold [to Dewey], 1939 June 20). Previous letters had informed Dewey of some important events in the evolution of BMC: a student, Richard Porter’s suicide, the purchase of the plot of land that would become BMC’s Lake Eden campus, as well as the situation surrounding Rice’s resignation, which Dreier initially explained as “a short leave of absence” (Mangold [to Dewey], 1938, March 21; Dreier [to Dewey], 1938, April 6). Ultimately Dewey remained committed to his position on the Advisory council until the late 40s. A final lengthy unsent hand-written letter from Dreier addressed to Dewey provides a grim picture of the final days of Dreier’s involvement in college affairs (Dreier [unsent letter to John Dewey] 1947, July). Duberman has described in less sympathetic terms Dreier and Albers’ ploy to wrest control of BMC from the faculty and hand it over to a new Board of Trustees. At the root of Dreier’s decision, as usual, was a concern for
the financial stability of the college. Black Mountain had never been officially accredited by the State of North Carolina, and student enrollment was too unreliable (Duberman p.484-5). But this was just one of many problems facing BMC in the late 40s. Dreier despairs in his unsent letter at the difficulty of finding good teachers who are also capable and willing college administrators:

*Our program, a pretty real thing to [Albers] and me, was not much more than words to most new [faculty] members with one or two notable exceptions… One way of looking at the present difficulty is to say that we simply haven’t been able to get the staff we need. If we could get an adequate team that could pull together, then I think we could raise the money we need* (Dreier [unsent letter to Dewey] 1947, July).

So, Dreier’s concerns are both immediate and practical, but no less frustrating for their immediacy or practicality. He is trying to escape a catch-22 of money and talent. But also, more tellingly, Dreier writes:

*Another way of looking at our trouble is that our program has become unclear, conviction has sagged… Hardly anybody sees what’s wrong, but gradually the whole thing is sagging toward breaking* (ibid.).

Dreier’s pain and frustration are palpable here. The emotion of this letter is even intensified by the fact that he decided not to send it to his mentor, Dewey. But this unsent letter to Dewey shows the philosophers’ influence as a guiding voice for Dreier, Albers and other faculty at BMC in the 1940s. Dreier, in writing this letter seems to be implicitly asking himself, “what would Dewey do?” not because John Dewey was some all-knowing being, capable of rescuing Black Mountain College from dire financial straits, but because Dewey’s pragmatist method of evaluating experience and taking
action had been the basis for everything he had helped create at BMC over the course of the previous 15 years.

Conclusion

The changes in administrative structure that Dreier alludes to in his final unsent letter to Dewey, which he and Albers attempted to implement as a last-ditch effort at financial solvency for BMC, ultimately failed to stick. The ensuing crisis ended in Dreier and Albers being forced to leave. Ironically, strict adherence to the Deweyan progressive educational principle of professional autonomy, which was at the core of Rice’s idea for Black Mountain College, and which Dreier resigned from Rollins in support of, was the same issue that brought Dreier and Albers careers at BMC to an end when they switched sides. In other words, the same philosophical inclination that justified the founding of BMC in 1933 remained and kept BMC on its own radical trajectory in the late 40s, even when figures like Dreier and Albers stepped in to try to fundamentally change the way the college was organized. So, on the one hand, I admire Albers and Dreier for their failed attempt at prolonging the life of BMC. But on the other hand, even in this final failure on Dreier and Albers’s part— in their capitulation to the mainstream bureaucratic structure of higher education, the creation of a non-faculty Board of Trustees which would have had hiring and firing power for BMC— illustrates that the college retained that uniquely Deweyan pragmatist orientation and progressivism. When the community became aware of the changes that Dreier and Albers had gotten underway, they acted democratically to kick Dreier and Albers out!
There is a lot more that still needs to be said about the case of Black Mountain College. Before I learned about BMC in an art history class, I had previously had no idea that such a hub of educational and artistic experimentation had existed just a few miles outside of my hometown of Asheville. I soon learned that the reputation of the College in North Carolina was mixed—ranging from obscurity to infamy to renown. I am only beginning to realize that Black Mountain, as small as it was, was an incredibly complicated institution, particularly in terms of the meanings it held and holds: a threat, an escape, an experiment, a failure or a model. I continue to mull over these possible meanings. And celebrated or not, I have come to realize that the educational program of the college deserves much more attention, in large part because it seemed so radically different in structure and emphasis from the experiences I have had as a college student.

Now as a graduate student, I am at a point in my career where I am empowered to direct my research to a greater degree than ever before. I have found that the image of Black Mountain College I formulated as an undergraduate still haunts my expectations for the academic institutions I inhabit now. Nevertheless my evaluation of Black Mountain is continues to change, even just in conducting the preliminary research for this paper. This essay hardly begins to approach the comprehensive breadth of discussion of Black Mountain and the people who lived and worked there that Harris or Duberman have provided. But my approach to BMC in terms of the philosophical ideas which guided the educational program there is relatively new. And I hope that the historical analysis of the ideas in play at Black Mountain College that I have been able to provide, lends to a greater understanding of the way that institution operated, and the impact it had, and continues to have, on the culture of American higher education. This project has
already dramatically changed the way that I think about the college where I work and learn, by complicating how I understand educational ideas and practice to be related.
And I hope that my research in this area will also have a similar effect on the students, teachers and other academic workers who read it.
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