

OF HISTORY, SAGAS, AND THE “K PLAN”: IN QUEST OF A USABLE PAST

Robert Stauffer

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Writing a college self-study can have two personal outcomes for the author. One is to cheer that the damn thing is over and cleanse the mind by turning to radically different matters. But the other is to get hooked on making sense of the place, where it's come from, where it's going, and why. For some pieces of the self-study, I found that the former outcome applied in spades. But for others, perhaps perversely, I *was* hooked. Most importantly, I had grown intrigued with the various indications in the self-study that our institutional identity was getting pretty fuzzy, and I wanted to learn more about why that had happened and whether it even mattered. This led to a series of questions. How did we think of ourselves prior to the K Plan? How salient was the K Plan as a source of identity in its early years, and how radical a departure was it? To the extent that the K Plan was salient, why the current fuzziness? And more broadly, what is the relationship between a strong college identity, on the one hand, and both the extent and quality of community at the college *and* the college's reputation, on the other?

Some of these questions obviously are historical, so I decided to devote part of the summer to reading carefully the published histories of the college, something I'm embarrassed to say I had never done before. At least two of these, Goodsell and Dunbar's *Centennial History* (1933) and Mulder's *The Kalamazoo College Story: The First Quarter of the Second Century of Progress* (1958) are actually quite compelling, and while far more cursory, Hinkle's *On Such a Full Sea* (1982) does provide a decent overview of the early K Plan years. But then I had a stroke of bibliographic luck. Paul Sotherland referred me to a book that had been recommended to him, Burton Clark's 1970 study entitled *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore*. This book, a wonderful marriage of history and sociology, provided exactly the conceptual focus I needed, both to ask the right questions of the histories and to frame what I intend to be several years of subsequent research.

Today, I want mainly to tell you where I am at this admittedly early stage of my investigations, set forth some very tentative generalizations and suggestions about the college, ask for your feedback and suggestions, and most importantly initiate a conversation. The place to begin is Clark's *The Distinctive College*.

The *Distinctive College* is a remarkably rich book, with a deceptively simple thesis. As such, it is difficult to summarize cogently, since the power of the thesis only comes across adequately in the context of the stories the book tells. That said...In the late 1950s, the sociologist Burton Clark, set out to discover why, in the universe of American liberal arts colleges, a few had managed to achieve particular national recognition during the preceding half century. As he writes in his introduction, "The making of a first-rank liberal arts college appears clothed in difficulty, even hidden from view in the mysteries

of personal magnetism and institutional aura. The insistent questions remain: How is it done? How has it been done?” (Clark 1970, 4) To begin to answer these questions, Clark devoted the following decade to a careful study of three colleges: Reed, Antioch, and Swarthmore. All three recently had been lauded by studies of the baccalaureate origins of doctoral students and recipients, and all three were widely perceived as of unusually high intellectual caliber. Yet each represented a different road to prominence. Reed, opening in 1912, achieved its recognition almost from the start. Antioch, an old college on the verge of collapse by 1920, was dramatically turned around. (At least for a while; I’ll mention later Antioch’s more recent history.) And Swarthmore, up to the 1920s an East Coast college with a middling reputation and a focus on sports and social life, experienced a more gradual yet still fundamental remaking to become the college we still know it to be today.

Into each of these places, Clark found, quite literally came a man with a mission: a president with a powerful and intense vision of what a good liberal arts college should be and do. And in each place, although for differing reasons, these men were given room and power to seek to define (or redefine) the college in accordance with this vision. Therein lies the seed of Reed’s uncompromising intellectual rigor and student independence, of Antioch’s integration of work-life and study as well as its highly participatory governance structure, and of Swarthmore’s honors program. Yet organizational innovations, even those initiated by strong and charismatic leaders, are highly vulnerable. Resistance may be mounted, at least in old colleges undergoing change, by faculty, alumni, students, and/or trustees. But even when such resistance is minimal or is overcome, persistence requires more than the president’s charisma and even the infusion of new and sufficient financial resources. Most fundamentally, a mission must be institutionalized in the structures of campus life, curriculum, and faculty roles, such that it comes to define the very nature of the college. This need is most apparent when the president retires or moves on, requiring, in Max Weber’s language, the routinization of charisma.

Here we get to the crux of Clark’s argument. What these (and other strong and distinct colleges) develop is a “saga.” And here also I can only do justice to the concept by reading several rather lengthy passages from the book; please try to overlook the gendered language of the time:

“Successful missions in time become transformed to some degree into organizational sagas. Initially, the mission is simply purpose, something men in the organization hold before themselves. But the mission tested and successfully embodied through the work of a number of years does not remain a statement of intent, a direction, a guidepost. It becomes a saga that tells what the organization has been and what it is today—and hence by extension what it will be tomorrow. In the mission we look to create a performance and a place; in the saga or legend we look to the history and the presence of a successful, willed creation. The institutional saga is a historically based, somewhat embellished understanding of a unique historical development. It offers in the present a particular definition of the organization as a whole and

suggests common characteristics of members. Its definitions are deeply part, of individual motive. A saga is, then, a mission made total across a internalized by many members, thereby becoming a part, even an unconscious system in space and time. It embraces the participants of a given day and links together successive waves of participants over major periods of time.

The most important characteristic and consequence of an organizational saga is the capturing of allegiance, the committing of staff to the institution. Emotion is invested to the point where many participants significantly define themselves by the central theme of the organization. The organizational motif becomes individual motive, much more than a statement of purpose, a doctrine of administration, or a logical set of ideas. Deep emotional investment binds participants as comrades in a cause. Indications of an organizational saga are pride and exaggeration; the most telling symptom is an intense sense of the unique. Men behave as if they knew a beautiful secret that no one outside the lucky few could ever share. An organizational saga turns an organization into a community, even a cult.” (ibid, 234-35)

(A brief insertion is needed here, lest you recoil in horror at the term “cult.” Clark’s thinking is implicitly but thoroughly Durkheimian, including his use of this term. For Clark and Durkheim, a cult refers not to some sort of thorough-going group fanaticism but rather to a collectivity bound together by a shared sense of awe and effervescence related to ideals and symbols to which they have posited a sacred quality.) That said, let me return to a several more passages from Clark.

“Participants within many colleges easily overlook the importance of a unifying and motivating theme when they think of improving the positions of their colleges in society. Faculty and administrators commonly pay attention to their courses and their bookkeeping, the bread and butter of college affairs, and assume that road is the one to salvation. Men outside colleges, on the other hand, can easily sit apart from day-to-day operations and offer grand designs. Reformers who advise others usually pay attention to the logic and elegance of their educational plans, the bread and butter of abstract argument, and hope therein to provide the keys to the doors of success. What is so difficult, so hard as to occur infrequently, is to put it all together: to realize the necessity of a unifying theme; to formulate one feasible in a given social context; to build the organizational conditions and structures that allow and help a mission to get under way; and to develop and continue the structures that elaborate a mission into a rich and encompassing definition of the institutional self.” (ibid., 236)

If so difficult, how can this happen? Clark summarizes the patterns of development he found common to the three colleges he studied:

“First, believers collect in the faculty and gain the power to protect their cherished ideals and practices. Second, features of the curriculum,

determining everyday behavior, reflect and express the saga. Third, a social base of external believers provides resources, including moral support, and interests a certain kind of student in the college. Fourth, the students develop a strong subculture that significantly incorporates the central idea of the college. [And] fifth, the saga itself—as ideology, self-image, and public image—has forceful momentum.” (ibid., 246)

Finally, Clark writes of the mutual reinforcement of college saga and college community. The saga “...offers an educationally relevant definition of the difference of the group from all others. And salient elements in the distinctiveness become foci of personal awareness and of a sense of things held in common with others currently on the scene, those who have been there before, and those yet to arrive. Distinctiveness captures loyalty, inducing men to enlist and to stay against the lures of careerism. And it arrests the most transient members, the students, extending their devotion for years to come” (ibid., 256). Conversely, the potential of a strong saga developing is enhanced by conditions more generally conducive to community, particularly small size and singularity of purpose, which is one reason a saga is more likely to emerge in a liberal arts college than in a university.

Here, then, was a powerful, resonant concept that already has guided, and certainly will continue to influence, my research on Kalamazoo College. Most immediately, and I will devote most of the remainder of this presentation to this, I want to consider the degree to which the K Plan has served as a basis for a Kalamazoo saga and, to the extent that it no longer does, why that is the case. In the longer run, I want to look farther back, to the Stone age, as it were, and to Hoben’s Fellowship in Learning, to see whether these would qualify as earlier Kalamazoo sagas *and* whether elements from these can be appropriated as part of a more holistic saga of the college. (Certainly a beginning in this latter goal was *Emancipated Spirits*, edited by Gail Griffin and published in 1983, as well as, thanks to Jim VanSweden, the recent publication in *LuxEsto* of some of Hoben’s writings.) But I’m also intrigued by one other issue, a kind of semi-saga of the college. I refer here to K’s remarkable record in the sciences and particularly in the “production,” prior to 1950 and subsequent to 1960, of future doctorates in scientific disciplines, and I’ll say a bit about this in what follows.

Surely at first blush, the original K Plan would seem to have the makings for a powerful subsequent saga. A year-round calendar, incorporating and enabling one or two systematic career quarters, study abroad for virtually all students, and a required equivalent to an honors thesis: this combination was a major innovation in American higher education and one seemingly destined to make Kalamazoo a truly distinctive college. Initiated by leaders of the institution, the Plan quickly was championed by a core of senior faculty, soon endorsed by the majority of the whole faculty, and covered rather widely by national media in the first few years. Students were lured to the college in part by this Plan, particularly study abroad; and the elements, language, and facilitators of the Plan (on and off quarters, career service, foreign study experiences, SIPs, “deviants,” even “Dr. No”) seemed destined to define much of campus culture and give students and soon alumni a sense that their college years were unique. Without question,

then, something significant had happened here, the beginnings of which sound, in many ways, like the stories Clark relates about Reed, Antioch, and Swarthmore.

I want to suggest two things, however. First, almost from the beginning, the effect of the K Plan on the college's, or at least the faculty's, sense of mission or purpose was more limited than we might think. Second, whatever collective identity or potential for creating a strong saga, in Clark's terms, the K Plan *did* provide has severely weakened over the past decade or two. Before turning to these points, however, let me stress as emphatically as possible that I am not attempting to lay out a critique of the special *elements* of the K Plan, i.e. career development, study abroad, and the SIP, in addition to the on-campus curriculum. Indeed, I think these were and are of great worth. My concern is with how we understand ourselves, and the implications of that understanding for providing a coherent education, sustaining intellectual community, generating commitment and loyalty, and moving beyond being a "hidden treasure" through attaining the national reputation we deserve.

Let me turn then to the K Plan's relationship to our mission and purpose in the "early years." Many of us have assumed, if we've pondered this at all, that the K Plan was borne out of a grand educational vision, often with the implication that the college before the plan was somehow floundering and purposeless. But this is wrong in at least two ways. First, when the K Plan was conceived, we were not floundering. While it is true that the college did verge on crisis in the early 1950s, largely due to poor planning for the small, depression-induced baby bust cohorts, a combination of improving demographics and much greater attention to admission efforts (this was one of Hicks' priorities upon assuming the presidency in 1954) rather quickly put us on an upward enrollment path. Moreover, money raised by President Hicks and Richard Light, chairman of the board of trustees from 1953 to 1973, allowed for new faculty lines at rates sufficient to lure to the college unusually talented individuals, including Larry Barrett, and for substantial salary increases overall. Upton Science Hall had been recently dedicated and other new buildings were occurring. And perhaps most dramatically symbolizing our strength, the *Chicago Tribune* in 1957 released its own ranking of "America's leading educational institutions," based on consultation with 33 "national educational leaders" and other data, and within the category of co-educational colleges, Kalamazoo ranked 9th, with the *Tribune* taking special note of Kalamazoo's strong science education (*Chicago Tribune*, 1957 and *Kalamazoo Alumnus*, 1957).

In short, one could even say that by the end of the 1950s, K was flourishing. What remains unclear to me, and definitely merits systematic research, is whether any real sense of a saga existed then, or even a clear institutional mission. The impression I have from my reading thus far is that faculty and students considered K a strong and perhaps unusually scholarly mainstream liberal arts college, and one where effective teaching was highly prized and often understood as engaging students in their own learning. There are shades here of Hoben's Fellowship in Learning, and I was struck by how frequently Frances Diebold, certainly one of the most respected faculty members in the '50s, used this phrase when she was later interviewed in the *Emancipated Spirits* project. Moreover, and Diebold is a common denominator here, there clearly was a sense that the college

excelled in science education, a sense no doubt reinforced by the exceptionally high rank K achieved in the *Origins of American Scientists* study, published in 1952 (Knapp and Goodrich). (Note that the plaque at the foot of the quad, dedicated in 1957, states that “This pioneer school has won national renown as a liberal arts college with special honor in teaching of the sciences.”) Beyond this, Arnold Mulder, writing about the ethos of the institution in the ‘50s in *The Kalamazoo College Story*, argues that a long-established “liberalism of the spirit” still prevailed, and this was complemented by a democratic ethos that both eschewed the divisive elitism of national fraternities and sororities and was increasingly reflected in more or less formal linkages of academic departments (economics, political science, sociology, history, art) with the larger Kalamazoo community (Mulder, 163-64). But again, judgment of the relative salience of these various elements, and the degree to which they were intellectually and/or experientially construed as part of a coherent institutional saga, awaits further research.

Our second mistake in looking back to the late ‘50s and early ‘60s is to think that the K Plan was primarily the outcome or expression of a clearly articulated and broadly shared educational philosophy. The initial impetus for what was to become the K Plan seems to have had little to do with educational philosophy. This impetus was two-fold. Board-chair Richard Light believed that putting the college on a year-round calendar would enable the college to achieve substantial operating efficiencies, and the trustees strongly urged (virtually mandated) the president and faculty to move in this direction. And President Hicks, as is the wont of many ambitious presidents, desired some sort of major innovation at the college, one that would attract donors and students. Under the leadership of Larry Barrett, then academic dean, and Ray Hightower, a professor of sociology, a committee identified three off-campus experiences that would fill in a year-round calendar and allow the college to expand enrollment significantly without commensurate increases in faculty and plant. One of these experiences, of course, would be foreign study, which built on successful trials with selected groups of students led by Dick Stavig starting in the summer of 1958, trials that again were largely the result of Richard Light’s advocacy, efforts, and resources. Dr. Light’s primary goal in promoting such study abroad, Stavig later wrote, was to enhance the teaching of foreign languages (Stavig 1986, 3). The other two experiences appear to have originated with Barrett, a man almost congenitally drawn to innovative educational ideas and who, interestingly enough in light of Clark’s book, was influenced by Antioch’s work/study alternation (hence, career service) and Swarthmore’s honors program (hence, the Senior Individualized Project). For Barrett, then, an educational philosophy of sorts *was* at work, a notion of the developmental impact of a series of more or less independent off-campus experiences. As he was later to write, with regard to one of the assumptions of the 1960 planning committee, “Objective studies made at Stanford had, apparently, demonstrated that young adults mature, not steadily, but by quantum leaps and that those leaps come when there is a change in environment and responsibilities. We wanted a program which encouraged and nurtured a growth into maturity, and we saw off-campus learning experiences as the key to achieving it” (Barrett, 6). But note that, in a real sense, this was a convenient theoretical gloss to put on an organizational solution—although I’m sure that was not the case for Barrett—and the limited evidence I have thus far raises real

questions as to how central this sort of thinking was or became to the college community as a whole.

One useful source is the so-called Danforth Study, a major institutional self-examination undertaken in the 1966-67 academic year. For the purposes of this study, the goals of a K education were organized into four categories: depth, breadth, basic skills, and personal development (does anything really change!) In his overview statement, Jean Calloway, the on-campus director, writes with regard to the personal development goal that “our off-campus programs clearly give the student the opportunity and the incentive to examine and test their abilities to cope with new situations in a way that four years on campus would never do. In this sense our program is designed to promote self-reliance, responsibility, and progressive independence. Whether we can measure it or not, I am convinced that our program results in a better understanding on the part of our students, of themselves—their strengths and weaknesses, their place in the world, and an awareness of the opinions and ways of life of other groups as few other schools can claim to do” (Calloway, I-22). *This* sounds as if Barrett’s thinking had indeed become part of the culture of the college. Yet on the very next page, Calloway observes that “in a more personal judgment, I would venture to say that our greatest weakness lies in our failure to perceive any clear and compelling sense of purpose and direction in our undertaking as a college which would unify the faculty, the students, and the administration and the many excellent programs which make up the Kalamazoo Plan” (ibid., I-23). Are these contradictory conclusions? I think not. The first speaks to the success of the K Plan in the language of personal development, whereas the second suggests that such language, or any other purposeful language, didn’t resonate widely throughout the college. And if I may indulge in my own recollection of the college only three-quarters of a decade later, these dual conclusions seem largely accurate. The K Plan probably was successful in these developmental terms, but among a large segment of the faculty, such developmental (or again, other purposeful) language was not deeply or enthusiastically embraced, and perhaps sometimes not even recognized. This recollection was reinforced when I recently read a chapter from alumna and trustee emeritus Marlene Francis’s 1984 dissertation. She quotes George Rainsford, who wrote in 1973 that “Kalamazoo College does not have a clear and widely accepted statement of its goals and missions [but it does have] certain characteristics and aspirations that are probably widely accepted in fact,” and she then adds that “under Rainsford there have been several attempts to clarify the mission of the college, but the issue is still unsettled. To some extent this seems to reflect an ambivalence between the identity of the past and the image of the present” (Francis, 209). (I am pleased to report that Dr. Francis currently is at work on a new history of the college, to be completed by 2008.)

My tentative take, then, on these early K Plan years is this: For most of the faculty, the K Plan was accepted and endorsed *not* because it was a radically new departure—a wholly new way of thinking about the college and its purposes—but more because it didn’t fundamentally challenge established ways and sometimes facilitated these. Dick Stavig’s retrospective comments in 1974 are instructive in this regard: “I thought the plan affected primarily the calendar and the incorporation of off-campus programs into the educational program, and I still think so. Because the off-campus programs were

essentially supplements rather than substitutes, they could be accepted” (Stavig 1982, 1). It is telling to observe that, in fact, one of the going-in assumptions was that the basic curriculum of the college was not to be tinkered with, as Barrett noted in his 1989 essay, “Betting the Store” (Barrett, 6). Moreover, career service and foreign study were things *students* did, although foreign study especially could enhance some disciplinary work, primarily in languages, some of the social sciences, and art history, and the program did facilitate more international travel for many faculty members. The SIP fit nicely into strong majors programs and reinforced prior notions of independent learning in the disciplines. Moreover, faculty were able to teach fewer and smaller courses (the teaching load before the Plan was four courses per semester). Indeed, if there *was* one widespread source of discontent among faculty in the immediate pre-K Plan years, it had to do with this heavy teaching burden, a point stressed by Barrett (*ibid.*, 5). Now, all of this no doubt was progress. But it is not the stuff out of which strong sagas are made. Again, for some faculty, study abroad and the larger sense of K as an international college probably did resonate deeply and gradually take on an element of the cultic quality Clark associates with a saga. But even this change was not pervasive, and it was not about the K Plan as a whole.

I don’t want to overstate this claim, however. It is probably true that at least for the first couple decades of the K Plan, it did create among the faculty a real feeling of pride in being part of what was perceived as a truly innovative educational venture. Whether this was an “*intense* sense of the unique,” in Clark’s words, is unclear, but surely there was a sense of the unique. Moreover, the Plan *did* gradually have some impact on the curriculum, particularly in periodic efforts to provide more on-campus international courses and programs, thus indicating at least some correspondence with another of Clark’s indicators. And it is even possible that the absence of a more thorough-going curricular impact, for example a core first-year program with a broadly international emphasis, was not the result of faculty indifference but rather of the structural implications of the K Plan itself. If even science students will learn languages and study abroad, the basic science curriculum must be front-loaded, rendering any significant common core impossible.

These qualifications notwithstanding, however, I do wonder if what Clark stipulates as the key sign of a saga really took hold. Recall the following: “The most important characteristic and consequence of an organizational saga is the capturing of allegiance, the committing of staff to the institution. Emotion is invested to the point where many participants significantly define themselves by the central theme of the organization. The organizational motif becomes individual motive...” (235). Only further research (interviews, coupled with scrutiny of faculty meeting minutes, chapel talks, earlier self-studies, rationales in new course proposals, etc.) will help us answer this question, and possibly I am wrong. Con Hilberry, in 1982, wrote that “The Kalamazoo Plan has become so deeply a part of our experience that one could almost say, as Clair Myers did the other day, that we *are* the K Plan” (Hilberry, 49). If Clair meant that we had, by that time, no other coherent way to talk about ourselves, then I would agree, for we had largely forgotten our pre-K Plan past. Con, of course, is suggesting that Clair meant

something other than this, and perhaps motif *had* become motive. But, with the exception of a handful of faculty, I'm doubtful.

The impact of the K Plan on *students'* perception of the nature and significance of the college has been another matter. Time and again, we have learned, sometimes to our chagrin, that when students (or alumni) reflect on their K education, it is their off-campus experiences that they consider most memorable or transformative. But at least in the past, I think it went deeper than this. From its inception until the mid-1990s, the K Plan was understood, by students and faculty alike, as virtually inseparable from the year-round calendar, and it was perhaps especially this calendar that, particularly for students, lent to the college a kind of appealing quirkiness. Coming to K was not for everyone but rather for those who were sufficiently independent or unconventional to take a chance on this weird place where you went to school in the summer and where people were always leaving and coming back. Or at least this was the self-image of many. Of course all along, some students have been attracted to K mainly because of its strong regional academic reputation and especially its prominence in science. But even many of these students were quickly socialized into the "off-beat specialness" of K and, along with others, linked their identities to the K Plan.

In short, while the argument would need to be developed and relevant evidence adduced, I submit that from the early '60s to the mid-90s, the K Plan, both as concept and as a particular set of remembered experiences, *did* become a genuine saga for many students. Possibly this attenuated somewhat in the later years, with some increase in pre-professional identities and motivation and/or greater concern about earning money in the summer as tuition escalated. And remember we changed the calendar partly because there seemed to be evidence that the old calendar was hurting admissions. But the reaction to the calendar change, among then current students and especially among alumni, actually reinforces my point. They perceived, often sadly or even angrily, that we were throwing out the K Plan, and from their point of view, they were right. No matter that career development, study abroad, and SIPs—and of course the on-campus curriculum—would continue; it all made sense and gained distinctiveness through the funny calendar.

So, I've argued that, at least up to the '90s, the K Plan served as the basis for, at best, a weak saga among the faculty, and tried to suggest some reasons why, and I've claimed, admittedly without adequate evidence, that it was the symbol and framework for a stronger student saga. Where does this leave us?

To the extent that the K Plan earlier *was* the basis for at least a weak saga among faculty, I suspect that it isn't even that now. Part of the reason was just mentioned: the calendar change. Students and alumni may have felt more deeply about the centrality of the calendar to the K Plan, but I'm now, far more than I was in the mid-'90s, ready to admit that they were right. Somehow, the year-round calendar lent a seemingly irreplaceable coherence and sense of reality to the Plan and not only for students. It simply is harder to "imagine" the Plan, to talk about it, and, however partially, to share in the students' experience of the Plan. No doubt some real gains were achieved with the change, and

this is not a call for the restoration of the year-round calendar. But, and maybe this is the right word, the Plan just doesn't have the *palpability* it once did; and to the degree that each of the component elements grows relatively more common at other colleges, the absence of the year-round calendar only increases the sense that we're no longer so unique.

But other factors have further weakened the K Plan as saga. In a fascinating article on the virtual disintegration of Antioch, the late sociologist Everett Wilson writes about the ways in which centrifugal forces ultimately can overwhelm centripetal ones (Wilson, 269-276). Antioch, like K, had a substantial degree of centrifugality actually built into its distinctive program and thus required an especially strong, countering pull. But some of the centrifugal forces identified by Wilson are experienced by many colleges: growing disciplinary specialization and identification of faculty with national disciplinary concerns, expectations, and rewards; funding priorities of foundations and donors *and* evaluative criteria of accrediting organizations; larger political and social movements, which generate calls for relevant curricular courses and programs. Of these, perhaps the most crucial for K is the first. Within the last decade, we've recruited a substantial proportion of the current faculty and done so largely within a buyer's market. Aside from the obvious fact that none of these faculty except those who are alumni of the college ever experienced the K Plan under the old calendar and before our purposeful language grew ever more complicated (I'll return to this in a moment), it means we have an astoundingly good young faculty but one whose initial point of reference is primarily their disciplinary specialization and professional organization. In some respects, this is a source of strength, but it ideally would call for a countervailing centripetal experience of socialization into the *particular culture of the college*, which we have assumed is somehow about, or shaped by, the K Plan. But if I am right that the K Plan has not been all that resonant among many senior faculty, such socialization also will have been rare, generating a downward spiral of resonance.

But the other centrifugal forces also have been felt. We've added on, at least partly in response to movements, issues, and/or funding in the larger environment, various "studies" programs (American, public policy, African, women's, environmental, East Asian, classical, international and area), some of which have become majors, and we've developed new academic programs (first-year, service learning). I hope it is obvious that I am not questioning the value of any one of these additions in itself, nor do I doubt the personal passion and commitment of those who initiated them. (In a couple cases that would include me.) Moreover, in some cases the connection to one or another element of the K Plan itself is clear. The point, however, is that we *generally* are not guided by a reigning conception of what we are about as these accretions occur and thus have no basis for making distinctions and hard choices, and that the more we have, the less clear it is what or who we are. Wilson quotes, as he puts it, "one of his favorite sociologists" who wrote, in *The Merchant of Venice*, "They are as sick that surfeit too much, as they that starve with nothing."

We've also, I fear, suffered a surfeit of conceptual scaffolding over the past decade, some as part of the "Renewing the K Plan" efforts of the mid-'90s and our admirable efforts to

be purposive. Thus, the three-part Foundations/Explorations/Connections, the Five Dimensions, our claim to offer an *experiential* education, and an *intercultural* as well as international one, all along with promoting diversity, “enlightened leadership,” “the farther journey,” and “crossing borders.” Much of this, at least, can be logically and coherently integrated, and some of us have worked hard to do just that. But the more we add and claim, again the less clear it becomes exactly what we are about and especially what the K Plan is in the context of this apparent richness and purposive complexity.

For all these reasons, moreover, I suspect the K Plan now has little potential for saga even among students. As suggested above, the calendar change probably was the death knell in this regard, but even if not, without a faculty that at least regularly and clearly talks the language—or even without a shared and focused language itself—from where will students today derive a sense of the meaning, not to speak of the significance or excitement, of the K Plan? Of course study abroad remains central to the students’ K experience, as do SIPs, and perhaps the career externships are catching on. But for an instructive lesson in semiotic confusion, just ask a group of students what the K Plan is. (Whatever symbolic unity the students experienced in recent years, I suspect, revolved more around the personality of the leader, but, with the exception of several moments of crisis, that had little to do not only with the K Plan but with any larger vision of the college.)

Does any of this finally really matter? In some ways, perhaps not too much. Without attention to the issues I’ve raised, we probably could continue to be good, sometimes very good, at many things and thus remain the more than respectable, hardworking, often stressed out little place we are today, although the admissions situation this year does give one some pause. But there isn’t much joy here, among faculty or students, at least outside particular courses or some departments; that in turn is because there’s little *esprit de corps*; and there’s little of that *partly* because there’s no compelling saga. I emphasize “partly” since I don’t think a strong saga is an absolute, much less sufficient, condition for a cohesive and often joyful college. The latter attributes on the whole may have been descriptive, even among faculty, several decades ago, and I’ve already suggested that the faculty even then lacked such a powerful saga. (I recognize all was not wonderful earlier, far from it, and that such recollections are vulnerable to bias and nostalgia. Yet at least some of the earlier problems actually *united* the faculty.) Especially now, however, when we are more differentiated by age, specialization, and even the ecology of the campus, whatever centripetal forces that previously operated are weaker, and the need for a strong saga is correspondingly greater.

What to do? One solution, of course, would be to await our new president, hoping she or he is a charismatic figure who will usher in the beginnings of a wholly new saga for the college. While I devoutly hope that our newcomer will indeed be an educational thinker and leader, this strategy strikes me as unlikely and not even especially attractive. Rather, what we need to do now is begin a conversation (or converge existing ones) about what ultimately and most fundamentally has made, continues to make, and can in the future make K particularly distinctive. And by conversation, I don’t mean one or two faculty meetings with breakout groups or a SWOT analysis. These are sometimes useful

strategies for specified ends, but we require something much more sustained and thoughtful. Above all, I urge that this conversation be historically informed. We need to know more about how we were distinctive *before* the K Plan and thus lay the groundwork for a more rooted and complete saga. We might discover, for example, a larger historical trajectory rooted in a particular kind of teaching and a particular kind of intellectual community that could be incorporated into what we might or might not still call a K Plan. Evidence suggests that a special kind of teaching and community *did* contribute powerfully to our recognized early prowess in the natural sciences (see Knapp and Goodrich, 159-169), and *that* historical (and revived) achievement would thus become at once a more coherent and a more integrated aspect of our saga, although only an example of a more general *tradition* of engaged and often independent learning. (Perhaps aspects of this can even be traced all the way back to the Stones.) Moreover, should we decide that “the K Plan” *as a term* is worth keeping—and not simply to mollify alumni—we should be prepared to at least partially redefine, or articulate differently, its constituent elements, in the process conceptualizing these more fully as what happens *on* campus as well as off. The current conversations about internationalizing the whole college experience are clearly an illustration of this possibility.

It would be self-defeating if, in calling for a conversation, I continue here to suggest or anticipate the specific nature of that conversation, so I will resist the temptation. However, I must offer one reminder. The end of any such sustained conversation should not be, or at least not primarily be, another (new or revised) list of goals or outcomes. A saga is not a bureaucratic document; it is a *story* a college tells about itself or, in Clark’s words, “a collective understanding of unique accomplishment” (Clark 1971, 500). While (again quoting Clark) “an organizational saga presents some administrative logic, some rational explanation of how certain means led to certain ends...,” it also “contains a sense of romance and mystery that turns a formal place into a deeply beloved community” (ibid., 501). Our task, then, is to discover the strong story line of Kalamazoo College, including the people, events, and achievements that made and subsequently symbolize that story, and then to find ways to express the story in how and what we teach, in ritual and ceremonial occasions, in college publications, in whom we honor, in the socialization of new students and new faculty, in how we do and how we don’t innovate, and in many other ways as well.

Let me close by turning briefly to the question of reputation. My underlying concern in the foregoing has not been about reputation but about the quality of our collective life at the college, especially as this can be influenced by a shared and distinctive identity. But Clark clearly suggests that a strong saga can contribute to an enhanced public recognition of a college, and the current preoccupation with “branding” among higher education marketing specialists, while far shallower than Clark’s notion of a saga, bears a family resemblance to the saga argument. How has, or might, this apply to “K”? My simple answer is that I don’t know, but I want to tell you what intrigues me and thus what I hope to explore further. Recall that in 1957, the *Chicago Tribune* ranked “K” as the 9th best coeducational liberal arts college in the nation, based substantially on the responses of 33 consultants, most of whom were deans at major universities, although some were directors of admission. Above us were Oberlin, Swarthmore, Carleton, Reed, Pomona,

Grinnell, Lawrence, and Wooster; number 10 was Hope. Now one reason we, and Hope, did so well may rest with the *Tribune's* choice of consultants. Of the 33, 27 agreed to be identified, and of these, six were at the University of Chicago, one at Northwestern, four at Michigan, and one at Michigan State. In short, we probably gained a regional advantage. But that may be another way of saying that, for once, our strength was less likely to have been a "well-kept secret." In any event, "K" was described by the *Tribune* as being an institution of "scholarly distinction," and special reference was made to its success in producing future science doctorates, an image and an achievement consistent with the college's self-image at the time.

Thanks to Carolyn Newton's help, I obtained a *reputation* ranking of national liberal arts colleges from the 2004 *U.S. News* analysis (reputation scores make up 25 percent of an institution's overall score and are based also on consulting administrative and admissions leaders). We shared the 52nd rank in reputation with six other colleges. But what if one then deletes all the colleges that, in 1957, were not coeducational? *That* moves us (and other six) to a reputation rank of 22nd in 2004. Pretty good, but not 9th. In short, assuming rough comparability between the two ranking systems, we dropped in reputation rank over this 47 year period, even though we had not even introduced the K Plan at the time of the first ranking or benefited from the substantial initial national publicity it generated. Why? Is it that the K Plan as an institutional identity wasn't adequately articulated in the national educational scene over the long run? Or did the K Plan identity somehow compete with or muddy our scholarly reputation, partly because we attended insufficiently to our larger story? Or did the colleges that moved ahead of us over this half-century come to have stronger sagas that made them appear more distinctive? (These colleges were: Middlebury, Macalester, Colby, Bates, Bucknell, Colorado, Occidental, Dickinson, Rhodes, St. Olaf, Earlham, Bard, Union, Depauw, Furman, and Denison.) Or does reputation frequently and perhaps increasingly depend on more mundane things (money, for example, or location)? My hunch is that the answer to all of the above is yes. But I do suspect that, to some extent and in some cases, a strong saga is implicated, and one of my research goals is to compare carefully one or two of these other institutions with "K" to try to determine whether, and if so, how, the strength of the institutions' sagas *have* had reputational consequences. I'll report back if I learn anything.

In the meantime, let's talk.

(Note: List of references to be added.)