



# Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One  
-Plato-

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## COLLEGE TOWNS—BUILDING AN IDEAL

By  
Tom Bragg  
Assistant Professor  
USC Salkehatchie

It's an idea at least as old as Plato: we carry around ideas that relate to true Ideals. Somewhere, on some other plane of reality, there exists a perfect Chair, or Moustache, or Loaf of Bread. We seize upon these Ideals when we try to make them our own: we build a chair and try to incorporate those Ideal chair-like qualities, to replicate the *chair-ness* of that perfect Chair. We try to shape our moustache into the perfect moustache. We try to bake the perfect loaf.

For me, the Ideal I longed for was the college town.

The first time I ever set foot on a college campus, I was fourteen. That campus was Indiana University in Bloomington, and the year was—well, Huey Lewis and leg-warmers were in style. Culture Club was passé, but not yet forgotten. Nobody knew who Jay Leno was yet.

The campus was enthralling to me—mind-blowing, idyllic, some kind of Nirvana achieved. Imagine, thought I, an entire city dedicated to the purposes of learning. And how it looked the part! Primeval trees cast their wisdom along with their shade, across new scrub and winking flowerbeds. Old, venerable classroom buildings sat, like tired pro-

fessors, sequestered in comfy, dim seclusion from each other, each respecting the privacy of its colleagues. Chipped and charred pavers marked charming paths through green commons, where your foot might just tread on a thoroughly domesticated squirrel or bunny if you weren't careful. Chimes clanged. Old bells rang. Even the unromantic car traffic had the decency to sound muffled and muted along these footpaths.

Oxford must be something like this, I thought. Cambridge and Yale too. I knew nothing about such places, as I had known nothing about Bloomington a few weeks earlier. But my mind associated them with old learning, with altruism and inspiration, reason and rationality, musty books and dusty classrooms, and cramped but cozy dorm rooms where burned the midnight oil. I imagined professors—all white-haired and wizened men, with Einstein bedheads and thick glasses—huddled behind podiums in their black mortarboards, spouting the sort of rare wisdom that would be sure to change your life, if you could just stay awake from last night's cramming and *listen*, I mean really *concentrate* on it. I imagined studying Shakespeare beneath the trees, nestled comfortably in the gnarled cradle of their maternal roots. I thought of rummaging the porrrly-lit, suspicious-smelling libraries for the one elusive volume that would help me unlock the mystery of *Odeipus Rex*, and write the essay that would win accolades from my professors. (“Positively brilliant!” “By Jove, Bragg—somehow you’ve cracked the nut!”)

I remained in Bloomington for a week with my high school drama group, performing in an original one-act about Bible translator William Tyndale, and competing with other groups from all over the country. When our avuncular school principal and resident playwright (whose appropriate nickname was Buddy) took me to inspect the old hall where we would be performing, my heart-of-hearts—already wooed by the sleepy pace and respectability of the town—surrendered utterly. The stage was broad, old wooden boards, stained with age, creaking delightfully with every step. Up amid the rafters, cloth backdrops could just be glimpsed, waiting to be lowered into place for the magic to begin: a medieval garden wall for *As You Like It*, turn-of-the-century Main Street for *Our Town*, the deck of a battleship for what play I knew not but could imagine. The chairs in the audience sat barely visible beyond the yellow star-gleam of the houselights...soon to be filled with eager spectators, gathered together to watch me play the twisted Cardinal Montague, threatening poor, hapless, starving Tyndale, beating him into helpless submission to the too-powerful Mother Church. (Wicked laughter.)

I knew I would act better, more convincingly, more sincerely on this stage than ever before—just as I somehow knew I would live better, happier, more *authentically* in a college town than in my hometown.

From that week on, my life's goals changed. One way or another, I would become a citizen of such a place: a rightful inheritor of this golden tradition. A partaker in this grand effort. A loyal denizen—nay, the very Mayor—of College Town, U.S.A.

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That hometown was Jacksonville, Florida, which apparently boasts the largest city limits in the country, large enough (so I've read somewhere) to contain the entire

U.S. population if everyone stood about a yard apart. (Nagging practical questions: Would we *want* to do that? Surely it would leave important posts untenanted somewhere. Wouldn't such a project encourage looting? Could our congressmen be relied upon to show up? Would we want them to?) These larger-than-normal city limits have caused Jacksonville to grow amorphously—oozing out to fill up area, like the fat guy next to you on the plane—rather than tidily and economically, filling in nooks and crannies cohesively, meaningfully. No bookstore district here, or Italian neighborhood, or downtown shopping strip. There is strip mall and city building and strip mall and empty lot and liquor store and another strip mall. Somewhere amid all that sprawl, several college “campuses” lie hidden from view: Jones College, Jacksonville University, the University of North Florida, the many campuses of Florida State College.

These many mini-campuses did not begin to make Jacksonville the “college town” of my heart and mind, that villa of expectation and opportunity that Bloomington had seemed. But as the first kid in a working-class family to attend college, I took what I could get. Sure, a few lucky high school friends had gone off to college, but most of us took courses locally if at all, while we got jobs and got married and got pregnant (not necessarily in that order), all without changing our zip codes. I took whatever classes I could sign up for, and attended them at drastically different venues, from the Orwellian, factory-like trappings of Florida Junior College's South Campus (FJC was known to us as Flunky Junkie College) to shopping mall spaces and corporate offices, rented by the local schools for the odd General Ed section, to downtown, barb-wired campuses built in the '60s, with boxy buildings so angular and modern they looked as though Mike Brady designed them. This, I felt miserably, was a

far cry from those green, pastoral and pregnant orchards of learning, those cornucopias of culture, ideas, and ambition: the college towns.

If the scruffy campuses did not match the ideal picture in my mind's eye, neither did the people—professors nor students. The professors were not all men, not all old, in some cases neither wizened nor wise. Some seemed far less organized than we students did—a scary thought. Some were openly hostile, as though we had just interrupted their very important work at its most crucial phase—yes, *we* were the cause of those wrinkled brows and glaring expressions, a permanent stink beneath their nostrils.

Looking around at many of my classmates, I could well believe that: scruffy, unkempt, ill-smelling teens, wearing wrinkled Megadeath and Bill the Cat T-shirts to class, hairy toes poking out of stretched-out flip-flops. And those were the women.

I smoked in those days, and can well remember the very moment when I realized I had become part of this nondescript mob—sneaking out of a long class for a furtive cigarette in the unwelcoming concrete common, preferring carbon monoxide on a stone bench to the forced wit and strained wisdom of some idiot prof. I wore a stubble beard, multicolored surfer shorts (my grandfather called them “go-to-hell britches”), and the same pair of shoes I wore to mow the lawn. Once again, I had rolled out of bed and come to class. One more time, despite the best intentions, I hadn't read my assignments, and had suffered a bout of ignorance in class. Dear oh dear, whatever had happened to that junior thespian, that hopeful kid, so sure he was bound for the big time at some romantic oasis of learning?

Still, things weren't all bad. The libraries were really cool. Even the junior college libraries had microfiche rolls that bog-

gled my mind—I could read the *New York Times* personal ads from the 1930s, or *Rolling Stone* reviews for the Beatles's albums when they were still new, or examine the (surprisingly modest) centerfolds from 1950s *Playboys*. The huge, labyrinthine library at UNF even had bound volumes of *National Lampoon*, year after year of that old college humor mag, which I could now read and actually understand the jokes. True, I probably shouldn't have been skipping class to do that. But live and learn.

Then there were the professors—turns out, not all of them were asses. My French prof had actually lived in France for seven years; he had developed a bit of an accent, and occasionally cursed in French when he got frustrated. My statistics teacher actually got me interested in math; she had us solve problems that fired the imagination, like figuring out how many roaches would infest Kitchen X if given Y amount of time and Z rate of reproduction (Shudder!). Instead of sighing wearily “You guys all know this, right?” while writing problems on the board—thereby forbidding anyone to say no—my algebra prof actually slowed down and repeated procedures, graphed problems, brought in relevant news stories or trivia problems. I went from being a perpetual math failure to third in the class. *I could do math*—who knew?

At UNF, my undergraduate alma mater whose unromantic topography at least had the advantage of being secluded from the highway by a nature preserve, some of those Bloomington daydreams actually did come true after a fashion. I did end up studying Shakespeare under a tree or two, at least until it got too hot, or the mosquitoes found me. Once, I got to play Iago in a lit class, even if that performance was marred by someone's bright idea of costuming Othello in an O. J. Simpson jersey. I actually did end up writing that paper about *Oedipus Rex*—and if it did-

n't crack the uncrackable nut, at least it earned some unforgettable words of encouragement from my favorite prof. "I am a Tom Bragg fan," he wrote at the bottom of my last page, next to the A. Such a simple comment, yet such power in those words: that expression of faith and confidence was good for many a mental and emotional mile during graduate school.

So Jacksonville was no college town—not spatially, anyway. Still, the good profs and their good books; the early morning crowds in the libraries, falling asleep over textbooks; the often unexpected but scintillating discussions about life, truth, or morality that happen in a given class; the opportunities, however stolen and restricted, of exploring ideas, novels, poems, music, art, technology—"Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try," as Dr. Seuss put it—all these things brought the college town into my highly compromised real life. They gave me a little corner of my own, a little park bench at the edge of the common. A little study carrel of relative sanity.

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Gainesville, Florida—now that was a real college town, yes?

The love first sparked that week in Indiana, somehow preserved throughout my years taking classes at cold industrial complexes and shopping centers—that love could finally awaken and flourish at the University of Florida. Here were the old buildings, the shaded walkways, the quiet bustle of the academically inclined. The sprawling common full of students, lounging on the grass between classes. There was no gentle spring weather to speak of, and no nearly-tame bunnies. But Century Tower had a carillon you could hear chiming out, clearly and beautifully, all over campus. And some of the oldest buildings, like the Judaica center and the business college, were swathed in ivy.

Furthermore, since UF had started as

a seminary and rapidly outgrew itself during the '30s and '40s, there lingered some wonderfully incongruous surprises scattered about in the architecture, giving campus an additional charm. The music college building clearly used to be a church, for instance, with its spires and inspiring acoustics intact. Pained-looking stone faces peered down (sinfully?) from the eaves of the chemistry building. Chiseled Bible verses over the doors set you straight as you entered Norman Hall, the education college.

But if the setting of my little play was finally right, the character dynamic had altered drastically.

No longer was I one of that un-ironed mob who could afford not to care; as a teaching assistant, I now had both teachers *and* students. Now I had to choose either to be that teacher who cared and took the extra time—or one of those with the smell under my nose, accosting students with my annoyance and outrage.

God knows, I still found plenty of that sort of professor in this picturesque college town, teachers who regarded students as an interruption and treated them accordingly. I suppose you find them everywhere. Worse were those profs who had arrived at their hostile teaching stance by some misguided pedagogical method, as though they were doing students some bracing kind of good by being irate and intolerant. "I want to make students uncomfortable in my class," explained one, and I thought how I had been plenty uncomfortable enough without help, thank you very much.

For my first year or so of teaching I probably acted like I had something to prove, like I had to pass on some of the bile I had been dealt. But teaching from a place of anger, or bitterness, or indignation—however righteous—is dissatisfying and, ultimately, too exhausting. Somewhere around year three

I started to remember my mentors and try to emulate them, to become “fans” of my students and perhaps bring a little bit of my ideal college town into my classroom each day. Even though the students didn’t always act the part themselves. Even though they often seemed oblivious and put-upon, like they had never expected any less than the college town they awoke to every morning, bleary-eyed or hungover. Like they in fact had expected, and felt entitled to, a good deal more.

This student body didn’t lack what I had lacked, so they didn’t seem to share my ideal, didn’t appreciate their surroundings and opportunities as much as I imagined I would have. They had been “bred” to go to college—in many cases, to join Dad’s old frat, Mom’s old sorority. So these college town trappings were nothing special, nothing sacred to them. They played Lady Gaga songs on the carillon. They left beer bottles all over my shady lanes on game days. They leaned against my old trees to throw up.

What students did seem to appreciate, however, was me—or at any rate, my increasing enthusiasm for teaching, and for them. They actually responded to my deep-seated and dare I say idealistic conviction that I was doing what I was meant to be doing. If they had no romantic notions about colleges and college towns and learning and exploring and developing, many of them certainly figured out that I still had a few. And that seemed like enough to make them listen, and learn.

One of the great things about being a teacher is that you’re always in the middle, like a conduit, between what you love and others who might come to love it also. At one

and the same time you are sparked and you provide the spark.

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I’ve never been back to Indiana U’s Bloomington campus. No doubt it’s nothing like I remember it. My shady lanes are probably dotted with trash cans; the venerable buildings now wear Starbucks signs. It isn’t important that I go back, of course.

All that happened on that first campus visit was that my appreciation for college towns—a way of life, a commitment to learning, an awareness of leisured culture, call it what you will—was first triggered. That appreciation ultimately has had less to do with pleasant campuses than with an increasing understanding that colleges and universities are precious places, neither guaranteed nor invincible, and all too vulnerable to abuse, to disuse, to misuse. All too vulnerable to complacency and inertia, yet all too evidently worth fighting for. Worth creating, wherever you happen to be.

The willingness, writes Elaine Scarry, “continually to revise one’s location in order to place one’s self in the path of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education” (7). What I found implied spatially in my first college town I would like to revise, to replicate in others. That replication has less to do with old trees and bell towers than with faculty bringing their hope and confidence into their classrooms, with actually trying to inspire the “city dedicated to learning” I first sensed. After years of treasuring my ideal, I’ve finally come to a startling realization: I would rather help build the perfect college town than live in it.

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Tom Bragg earned his Ph.D. from the University of Florida. His area of specialization is Victorian literature, especially the British novel. He has published articles in *Studies in the Novel* and *Victorian Newsletter*.



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EDWIN O. MERWIN JR., MLS  
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