17. The Wesleyan Story: The Importance of Moral Capital

by Burton R. Clark

The Wesleyan University of 1972 is a small place of complex character. A settled institution of ivy heritage and New England tradition, it changed sufficiently in the years after World War II that it is now widely considered progressive as well as stable, of first-rank academic quality as well as of solid virtue. Quiet self-alteration has made the college seem unproblematic throughout nearly all the recent years, not exciting but noteworthy as a model of how to adapt gently in an evermore turbulent environment.

In 1969, the college became front-page news as a small campus in serious trouble, with a stream of articles and accounts telling of militant black students clashing with whites, and how the campus was thrown into turmoil by demands, sit-ins, fights, and fires. Whispers could be heard in college administrators' circles about "the Wesleyan problem." Had the college gone too far too fast in admitting blacks? Had it been too permissive in facing strident student demands? Had Wesleyan stumbled into crisis? Were there any lessons to be learned from its experience?

In order to interpret specific events and changes, we must, even in a brief essay, attend seriously to the historical development and the resulting identity of the college. Recent happenings can then be seen in context, assigned meaning—as they are by the knowledgeable actors in the situation—in relation to the flow and style of the institution. The context of events at Wesleyan is one where the advantages of substantial conventional capital, in the form of high income and competent staff, have been joined by the advantages of moral capital, an accumulated strong self-belief formed around a legacy of moral understanding. To trace the development of these dominant features, we begin with a glance at Wesleyan's earlier history and then portray the critical change in the character of the institution in the last quarter century.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS

In the distant retrospect of a later century, there was little that was unusual about Wesleyan University in its early years, for foremost were the practices and rhetoric of the search for survival so common among the private small colleges of the United States. Begun in 1831 by a group of Methodist clergymen full of determination but lacking in money, the college survived repeated financial and administrative crises while struggling to find an identity that would offer some security. Forced to muddle through for decades, the college stubbornly refused to die. Time and again at Wesleyan, as during the depression of the 1870s (Peterson, 1964, pp. 58–59), a small number of committed faculty, trustees, and churchmen rooted themselves in a logic of sentiments, keeping open an organization that any economic calculus would have sent to the grave. Their style involved a rhetoric of sacrifice: "the work of the college has been confined by the narrowness of its means . . ."; we have been "neglected and forgotten by the church . . ."; "[the] heroic professors [have] submitted to personal sacrifices . . ."; and "among the faithful and self-sacrificing friends of this institution, when it was poor and hungry and weak, must be recorded the honorable names of . . ." (*Semi-Centennial . . .*, 1881, pp. 14, 17, 19). The early Wesleyan style also involved the common religious college dilemma of autonomy and dependence, in relation to the formal church of the parent denomination. At times the college drifted away from the church, as administrators sought self-determination, the faculty greater freedom in teaching, or the students more fun and games. At other times the college moved toward the church, to reassert religious values, obtain more money, or strengthen the traditional constituency.

In the early Wesleyan, the elders were also fond of preaching to the young, from the set lectures of the fixed curriculum to the discourse to the graduating class on *Early Piety: The Basis of Elevated Character* (Olin, 1851). The intent to elevate character within a closely guarded community generated a counterforce that Wesleyan shared with other colleges: the students revolted from time to time. Under a severely paternalistic president known for his "correct views," who was bound "to do my duty" (Peterson, 1964, p. 115), Wesleyan in the 1880s was a center of smoldering resentment that erupted finally, in 1887, when a day set aside for student hell-raising got out of hand and events escalated into a mass egging of the president (ibid., p. 117).

Wesleyan also underwent the general evolution of the time. By

the turn of the century, one could speak of Wesleyan and the other surviving New England colleges—after the changes of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s—as having modified greatly their control and atmosphere. Wesleyan's faculty had moved toward the concept of academic freedom made popular in the new universities of the American scene. The students had moved toward freedom in the classroom under the elective system and toward more control of their lives outside the classroom in the subculture of sports and fraternities. All the basic features of the New England college were there, with an occasional idiosyncracy such as the move into coeducation in 1872, a deviation corrected when the college returned in 1912 to the maleness of Amherst, Williams, and Bowdoin.

And so it went in the early decades of the twentieth century. The college was a solid WASP institution which occupied a respectable place in the little-Ivy triad along with Amherst and Williams. Moderation and tradition were the names of the place. The religious commitment eased toward a respectable nonsectarianism. Standards were stiffened gradually but never too severely. Although a university in name, the institution remained a liberal arts college that concentrated on undergraduate education. The student body grew from about 300 in 1910 to 700 in 1940. Student life centered in residential fraternities. Either boy met girl at the weekend mixer for which the girls were imported from women's colleges, or the men traveled to where the girls were. There were no deep financial crises, no faculty upheavals, no abrupt transformations, no major unique efforts.

Clearly, just before World War II Wesleyan was a college with a defined social role that had evolved slowly over decades, with no distinctive thrust. Its evolved role, however, was no mean asset. Interpreted in the light of later development, the college had established a base camp solid in the aura of tradition and the loyalty of established alumni. The tradition included moral uplift in the character of the young, a generalized theme upon which a man with a mission, one incorporating old-fashioned virtues, could resonate a special effort to climb higher in both quality and morality. After the war came the shift to mission, with purpose first sharpened and more strongly defined from within, then embodied in new practices and structures, and finally felt as a spirit on the campus.

THE AIMS AND MEANS OF CHANGE

Major change in the college was engineered during a presidency that spanned nearly a quarter of a century, from 1943 to 1966—

that of Victor Butterfield. Butterfield had vision and the capacity to persist in the hard work of implementing it. He also happened upon several conditions that greatly facilitated the work of institutional change.

Butterfield based himself in tradition by stressing that the college would remain small, independent, and nonsectarian. On that foundation, he mounted an effort to seek "distinction for quality" and suggested that there be no compromise with this principle (Butterfield, 1955, p. 1). At the same time, however, Butterfield wanted an institution of great moral concern, one rooted deeply in a Christian humanism. A liberal college should have "faith," he persistently maintained, faith based on intellectual understanding and expressed, not through exhortation, evangelical appeal, or compulsion, but rather through the personal example of men of "full and coherent conviction . . . willing to share their insights and opinions" or men who, feeling that their most cherished values are highly personal and private, will simply "let their light so shine" (ibid, p. 11). A sufficient number of such people would mean a "working spirit" of the whole that would be "by all odds the most important method of keeping the Christian tradition alive and vital and of giving it concrete and perpetually renewed meaning" (ibid, p. 12). Butterfield's aims, then, were a combination of high academic quality and modernized Christian tradition.

Among the means of achieving these aims, the most important in Butterfield's view was the recruitment and retention of appropriate faculty. The faculty should be a heady mixture of academic talent and moral concern, characteristics that seemed increasingly antithetical within academic circles. The ideal faculty member would be both a ranking scholar and a saint among men. Fully aware that faculty selection was the main tool of institutional change, Butterfield kept himself deeply involved in recruitment. Right up to near the end of his term, long past the time when a man of lesser commitment would have retired to quieter activity in his office, Butterfield was still on the road looking for faculty or interviewing candidates on their visits to the departments and divisions of the colleges. His efforts became legendary, told in stories of how he wined and dined and talked the evening through with a scholar, encountered by design or chance anywhere in his travels, whose character and intellect seemed to him appropriate for the mission of the college.

Butterfield was fortunate, particularly in his early years in

office, that many faculty openings occurred through retirement, wartime turnover, and institutional expansion. The men he recruited were often so impressive that they could not all be retained against the lure of an important university professorship or an inviting career in academic administration. A young Nathan Pusey was already on the scene in classics and was put to work shaping a freshman humanities program. David C. McClelland was brought into the psychology department in 1945, and the following year saw the arrival of Norman O. Brown in classics, Carl E. Schorske in history, and Steven K. Bailey in government—the latter to join two nationally known political scientists, Sigmund Neumann and E. E. Schattschneider, already on the faculty. Such appointments were evidence enough that Butterfield had a sharp eye for academic talent, men of high intellect and moral concern who could share in some degree his vision of what Wesleyan could become. The degree to which the faculty quickly became a Butterfield selected group, quantitatively, was also impressive. One observer has calculated that "by the postwar period [about 1950] he had brought in fifty-four [72 percent] of the seventy-five members of the faculty" (Hefferlin, 1969, p. 48). In the later years of his term, the faculty was almost entirely composed of men added during his presidency.

The considerable enlargement of the faculty was made possible by a vast increase in financial resources. Here the story approaches the unbelievable, as several trustees responsible for investment policy struck gold several times over. The purchase of an educational publishing firm which produced the *Weekly Reader,* read by millions of schoolchildren, proved so enormously profitable that good taste, invading competition, and the concern of the Internal Revenue Service over the nonprofit status of the college dictated a move to other investments. So the trustees sold the firm at great profit to Xerox Corporation, accepting in exchange Xerox stock that promptly took off on a success story of its own. The result of this and a few other bonanzas was that Wesleyan became, on a per capita basis, the richest college in the land. In 1962, its endowment was about $60 million, compared with about $30 million at Swarthmore—a well-financed college—and $5.5 million at poverty-stricken Reed. By 1966, its endowment had climbed to over $150 million, a truly fantastic sum for a small college. The institution had little difficulty in paying competitive salaries and financing expensive experiments as well as general expansion. It can even be said that for a few years the college had too much money.

The money and the faculty gave Butterfield and his senior colleagues the means of supporting and staffing a number of new programs and special units, among them a broad humanities course required of all freshman, a Public Affairs Center (1955) incorporating within it the social science departments, and a Center for Advanced Studies (1959) that appointed visiting scholars and men of affairs (Herbert Read, C. P. Snow, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Richard Goodwin) and later became a Center for the Humanities. Departments grew in size and competence; some could even effectively staff graduate programs through the Ph.D. The campus experimented with subcolleges; in 1960 it had one in letters, one in social studies, and one in quantitative studies.

As at other colleges, the traditions of student life were stubborn and difficult to overcome. As late as 1955, the faculty felt that the fraternity system was "the most important single non-curricular force on the campus in the formation and development of student values" and were concerned that the fraternities remained anti-intellectual (*Report of the Educational Policy Committee. . . ,* 1955, pp. 61–62). But slowly student life swung toward the academic and the intellectual, even in the late 1960s toward the radical and the nonconforming. Membership in fraternities declined from about 85 percent of the student body in 1955 to about 35 percent in 1970. With students perceiving the fraternities as "an archaic, dying and confining institution" and the college offering attractive alternative housing, the number of surviving frats declined from 11 to 7 between 1968 and 1970 (Surgeon, 1970, p. 74). The students were coming predominantly (70 percent) from public high schools, and as the college became known as a liberal institution, even the students drawn from prep schools were more likely to be liberal or radical than conservative. In a survey of the class of 1972, only one in five would define himself politically as a conservative, while three in five held the campus middle ground as liberal, and one in five saw himself as radical (ibid., pp. 4–6, 43–45).

If the beginning of the Butterfield era was a move from passive role to active mission, the middle years were a time of embodiment of mission in structure, practice, and belief. There had been a particular leader, a special effort, a set of new practices, and, finally, what seemed to be a unified institutional character in which men believed deeply. There was a modest organizational saga, a story of special accomplishment that was rooted in historical fact

but also romanticized into a sentimental belief.[1] There was a rhetoric of normative concern that mixed with a rhetoric of innovation. There was special meaning given to such terms as "liberal arts university" and "the little university" and a belief that Wesleyan, a small college, would experimentally and innovatively grow toward the commitments of a first-rate university but always with small scale, the liberal arts, and moral concern as primary values. Already in the early 1960s, one of the best historians of American higher education was describing Wesleyan as "moving toward a new integration of collegiate and university purpose" (Rudolph, 1962, p. 492).

The distinctive air of deep normative concern coupled with an attitude of innovation resonated well with the perspective of the Danforth Foundation, where the same sentiment of needed reform in American education, based on a Christian humanism, had taken philanthropic roots. Butterfield became a key figure in Danforth affairs; Kenneth Underwood, whom Butterfield brought in as professor of social ethics and public affairs and later made head of the Center for Public Affairs, was for years closely connected with the Danforth group; and others on campus have been participants in Danforth seminars or have received Danforth awards for excellence in teaching. The convergence of values here between a college and a value-focused foundation was as natural as it was considerable. In the language of academic clichés, Danforthites set the moral tone of Wesleyan and were "swinging religionists" committed to reform and willing to work in reform efforts with completely secular men. Perhaps the most visible agent of this spirit in the late 1960s was John Maguire in religion, a man of charismatic tendency who left in 1970, taking a small cadre of faculty and recent graduates with him, to head up the troubled, experimental Old Westbury (see essay by John Dunn in this volume).

In the 1960s, Wesleyan contained a definite strain between well-rounded amateurism and professional competence, a tension that can be observed everywhere among the liberal arts colleges that have continued to take seriously the traditional view of liberal education as general and interdisciplinary in nature while at the same time attempting to meet the interests of faculty and students

[1] On the buildup of sagas in college, see Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed and Swarthmore* (1970).

in competence in the specialized disciplines. Wesleyan's strong embodiment of a generalized moral concern, on the traditional side, and its upgrading to university-level scholarship, on the side of modern specialization, has ensured that the tension would be real. The high-caliber scholars whom Butterfield and his associates brought to the campus were not all perfectly balanced on the twin commitments of scholarship and morality. Predictably, prestigious faculty members would more often tilt toward the values of scholarship than toward those of general education and service to one's fellow man, and these sharp, high-priced people pressed to bring in men of their own type in making junior appointments from top graduate schools. Such men rejected the strand of Butterfield's thought that equated liberal arts with nonspecialization and became impatient with both the latter-day Christian humanists and the traditional "Mr. Chips type" in the faculty who, full of warm sentiment about "little Wesleyan," held to undergraduate liberal education to the detriment of scholarly competence. The specialist-scholars, pushing beyond Butterfield's dream, generated a move in the 1960s to evolve from "the Academy to the University" ("The New University," 1961).

All was not sweetness and light, of course, since institutional tension, in practice, spells prolonged argument and even steady anger over the other man's foolish views. The spending of all that money in new centers and various experimental structures caused some friction and had some fracturing effect on unity. Then, too, the president had almost inevitably worn himself out, and in his last years in office others had to steady the college. Some toll was there, paid in the energies of men and in the coherence and dynamism of the institution.

But even within the ranks of the specialists, who at many universities are the nonloyal cosmopolitans ready to exit for the better offer, there were men devoted to the welfare of others and, convinced that Wesleyan had great if not unmatched virtues, were completely committed to the institution; for example, Robert A. Rosenbaum, who had served for years in top administrative positions, Earl D. Hanson in biology, and William J. Barber in economics. Compared with other colleges and universities, many men were paid well in the coin of belief and morality as well as in that of salary and academic status. It was in this relatively healthy condition that the college moved into the special days of the late 1960s.

THE CRISIS OF 1968–70

In 1965, Wesleyan committed itself to admitting black students. In 1965–66, the admissions procedure brought in a small number of blacks, a group that suffered high attrition in the freshman year. An exceedingly vigorous effort under Jack Hoy, the director of admissions, brought a large jump during the next several years, to the point where, in 1969–70, blacks and Puerto Ricans numbered about 20 percent of the freshman class and 12 percent of the total student body of 1,400. This effort, in a small private college, was considerably in excess of what was occurring at the time in even many urban public colleges and universities, let alone in private institutions. For example, the Wesleyan enrollment of blacks alone in 1969–70 was about 10 percent, compared to 5 percent or less at Berkeley and Buffalo as well as at Columbia, Harvard, and Yale. Clearly, some internal adjustments would be necessary, perhaps some special tutoring for those blacks who were underschooled, but in the beginning there was little to draw upon by way of relevant experience at other colleges and hence adjustments had to be worked out as emerging problems revealed the failures of anticipation. At the same time, black students throughout the country were moving to militancy, with black separatism much on their minds.

In 1968–69, Wesleyan broke out with a rash of trouble. Black students were hearing racist slurs that they were no longer willing to dismiss as the highjinks of upper-class party boys in a few fraternities or as the hopeless stupidities of ultraconservatives in the town. Some were frustrated and angered by the problems set by inadequate scholastic preparation and by the misunderstandings generated by the linguistic and other cultural differences that separate lower-class blacks from upper-middle-class whites. The black students began, with an outspoken statement in the fall term, to react collectively to personal and institutional "insensitivities," the latter including the absence of adult blacks on campus. A few months later, they moved to a specific demand that classes be cancelled for a day of education on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King; and, when the faculty voted a refusal, the black students orderly occupied for one day the main classroom building. The students proceeded during the spring term with more specific demands in which the central issue was the establishment of an Afro-American Institute that would help to bring black visitors to campus and to infuse black faculty into the normal departments. In the fall of the following year (1969–70), the troubles escalated

in the form of specific and dramatic acts of violence and illegal activity: after a fight, the room of a white student was set on fire; shots were fired at a black administrator; many burglaries were occurring in the dormitories, and several blacks were arrested for armed robbery in the town. At one point, on the occasion of a homecoming weekend, the administration obtained an injunction against disruption by the blacks, a move that helped the college get peacefully through the weekend but, by stirring further resentment, helped cause continuing problems. The college now had significantly gotten the attention of the mass media and had gained national reputation as a college in trouble, signified notably by a long article in the Sunday magazine section of the *New York Times*, entitled "The Two Nations at Wesleyan University" (Margolis, 1970). The *Times* article, sure to excite alumni, donors, and parents of current and prospective students, spoke of white anger and fears, of increasing suspicion on both sides, and concluded on the note that "white students and black students do not even talk to each other" (ibid., p. 64). When white and black students together wrote a letter objecting to the article, the *Times* reporter replied that they were wrong and that "the racial polarization at Wesleyan is genuine and runs very deep" (*New York Times Magazine*, 1970).

During the same period, white radicalism had also heated up, centered in 1968–69 on student demands that military recruiters be barred from campus. Out of the growing concern about the Vietnam war, some white students developed a confrontation with a Navy recruiter. A joint faculty-student committee was set to work on the issue and came up with a quick report, complete with majority and minority recommendations. The faculty thereupon voted that Wesleyan should not bar any recruiters from campus; the students muddied the waters with a vote, on three alternatives, that was subject to varying interpretation. The faculty position prevailed, but the issue lingered.

Then, in the spring of 1969–70, the concerns of white students and black students came together in the three issues of Cambodia, Kent State, and the New Haven trial of Bobby Seale and other Black Panthers, and the campus took part in the strike action of students that stretched from coast to coast. In the fall of 1970–71, the campus returned to a peaceful state, punctured once by an isolated bombing of a campus building, and it remained that way throughout the academic year.

Before and during the months of trouble, the campus had been

working on various adjustments. Under sponsorship of the blacks, the college instituted a black repertory theater and a black arts festival as well as two courses in black history and culture. In the course of several years, more than 20 blacks were appointed to the faculty and a black associate provost was added to the administration. In response to the demands of early 1969, an Afro-American Institute was established and a historic John Wesley House was converted into a Malcolm X House. The college for several summers sent some blacks to compensatory education programs at other colleges, and when this effort seemed not to work, the campus turned to voluntary tutorials staffed by upperclassmen and teachers for anyone requesting help. Course work could be spread out over five years. Perhaps most important was that in such a small college black students came to know with whom they could and could not work, person by person in the faculty, administration, and student body. As initial institutional naiveté was replaced by the hard realities of implementing a change, specific programs and specific individuals broke through what the blacks had seen as a solid structure of institutional racism. One could even make a case, as it has been made at the college, that the basic changes in structure and relationship were well under way by 1969–70, when, in several months of bad luck, a number of isolated incidents involving a few individuals snowballed into heightened group tension.

The trouble and strain were certainly enough to make the most dedicated supporters of the heavy admission of minorities doubt at times that the college had moved wisely in this effort. The resisters had much to point to in complaining that academic standards were eroding at a pace commensurate with the decline in law and order and sanctioned their general complaint with specific labeling of some departments as "gut departments for blacks." But the supporters would not retreat. Here interpersonal ties and regard for the institution had a part. Men of quite different persuasion on the specific issue were not only equally committed to the general institutional welfare but also equally committed to be fair to one another and to the individual student. There were outstanding examples of personal caring, as when a faculty member quietly took out a mortgage on his house to bail out of jail a student whose values were completely antithetical to his own. The college held its basic unity and continued the effort to work out the necessary new adjustment.

Meeting the demands of blacks and coping with the wishes of

white radicals were not the only items on the institutional agenda in the late 1960s. There was also a major self-study centered on other issues and some administrative reorganization. Upon Butterfield's retirement, Edwin D. Etherington was lured from the presidency of the New York Stock Exchange to become head of the college, and he immediately initiated a policy study. The study committee took up women's education and recommended the addition of undergraduate women. It also took up graduate education and the roles of the Public Affairs Center and the Center for Advanced Studies and recommended that the college proceed carefully into additional graduate programs, that the Center for Public Affairs be rejuvenated as a center for multidisciplinary work in the social sciences, and that the Center for Advanced Studies be replaced by a Center for the Humanities. The advanced learning programs, even when leading to the Ph.D., were to be interdisciplinary as much as possible, and the two interdisciplinary centers were to revolve around faculty and students rather than visiting fellows. The study group also examined the college's efforts in teacher education and recommended changes oriented to urban schools and community colleges.

Efforts to implement these recommendations began in 1968–69. On undergraduate education for women, the college accepted transfer students in 1968–69 and in 1969–70 and began admitting women as freshmen in 1970–71, toward the goal of having, by 1974, 700 women in a student body of 1,700. A woman was appointed as an associate provost. In advanced training, history and psychology became defined as the departments headed next for Ph.D. programs, beyond the five already there (biology, chemistry, mathematics, physics, and world music), and the new Humanities Center came into being. Teacher education was reconstituted as proposed.

Under Etherington, the college made several changes in structure and procedure designed to improve communication and make administration more effective at three levels. A student-faculty senate was created with legislative and advisory powers. The central administration was reshaped to give the president more time for long-run planning, changing the direct involvement of his office in many campus affairs that had been a hallmark of Butterfield's personal style. At the level of the board of trustees, the college added faculty members and students to trustee commit-

tees, and blacks, women, and younger alumni to the board itself. "Participatory governance" was clearly making some headway at Wesleyan.

In February of 1970, Etherington resigned to run for political office. The chancellor, Robert Rosenbaum, filled in as acting president for a few months, and then Colin Campbell, who had come to the college with Etherington as executive vice-president, was selected as the next president. Young and vigorous, tested on the firing line during the days and nights of tension, Campbell has won widespread respect and support on the campus.

As Campbell began his presidency in 1970–71, the view was growing that Wesleyan was overextended. The effort to implement the commitment to the education of blacks, with its attendant strains, together with the various other efforts reviewed above finally seemed too much at one time, especially as the financial problems of colleges hit even Wesleyan. The strains of 1968–1970 thus led the college toward a hard look at priorities. Out of that examination, by the sping of 1971, there was forthcoming an unambiguous reassertion of the primacy of undergraduate liberal education. In the language of the new president: "we have faced the obligation to make hard choices in order to preserve our future"; "in reexamining the purposes for which Wesleyan stands, we have seen with renewed clarity the centrality of our commitment to excellence in undergraduate education"; "we must hone and harden our innovations to survive in a world of realities, a world of limited resources which we, no less than others, ourselves inhabit"; "survival at Wesleyan must continue to mean survival to innovate and excel" (*Remarks. . . ,* 1971). The president went on to openly rank programs according to their importance to the undergraduate curriculum, giving first priority to core undergraduate programs and financial aid for undergraduates, the latter notably to support substantial numbers of minority-group students. He assigned second rank to the existing advanced work in some departments and the interdisciplinary Humanities Center; and he offered lowest priority to certain activities which "we do not view as central or significantly in support of undergraduate education here," e.g., the Wesleyan Press and the Master of Arts in Teaching program (ibid., pp. 5–6). The press was put under review, the M.A.T. program began a phasing out. A number of major decisions were yet on the agenda, the president added, but he concluded that

playing a part. But organizations of higher education are much dependent on normative rather than utilitarian or coercive bonds and we must also look to the role of ideas and values. The Wesleyan experience suggests the fascinating possibility that belief and concern remain the core of the healthy institution of higher learning.

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