After Eden: The Civic and Social Potential of Innovative Higher Education

Patricia Karlin-Neumann and Eli Kramer

Introduction

> Johnston brings together every best practice that matters in higher education: small class sizes, relevant learning, contact with professors, collaborative relationships with colleagues, deepenings on community and what it means to be a citizen of the world, and intellectual inquiry… The amazing experience and learning is not unique to Johnston, it's just a lot easier to have once you arrive. (Interview 32.12.22.15)

In 1969, Johnston College, a fledgling innovative experiment in American higher education, was dubbed a "New Eden" by *Time Magazine*'s Higher Education reporter. For it was a place where students could "create their own courses, without grades or formal classes, and the key scene is the

P. Karlin-Neumann (✉)
Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
e-mail: rabbipkn@stanford.edu

E. Kramer
Institute of Philosophy, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

N. Coburn, R. Derby-Talbot (eds.), *The Impacts of Innovative Institutions in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38785-2_3

group-encounter session that joins teachers and students in working out their hang-ups together" (Colleges-The New Eden, 1969). The experiment was invigorated by a living-learning ethos in which democratic governance—with students as full partners with faculty—guided the whole community. Johnston sought to create an environment in which the qualities of a holistic and integrated learning experience—interdisciplinary teaching and learning, student-centered education, egalitarianism, experiential learning, and an institutional focus on teaching rather than research or publication (see Kliewer, 1999, p. xviii)—would be practiced. Infused with the countercultural energy of the 1960s, the entire college took to heart the (apparently only) directive of its benefactor, James Graham Johnston: "I dinna care what you're doin', as long as you're havin' a good time" (McDonald & O'Neill, 1998, p. xi).

A half century later, Johnston College is now the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies of the University of Redlands. While it is no longer "new," its Edenic ideals live on in a program that has shaped its home university and helped it navigate the current higher education terrain. Johnston continues to embody many of the hallmarks of innovative or progressive higher education: learning beyond narrow credentialing, a recognition of the need for personal development, and a cultivation of authentic relationships between teachers and students (e.g., Kramer & Fried, 2021).

Yet, given the crises we face today, some may regard such an education as an indulgence of a by-gone era where funding and resources for higher education were flush, and we were not fighting to secure democracy's future against tyranny and autocracy, as well as attempting to save ourselves from ecological collapse. Further, now that many historically innovative institutions of higher learning are coming under attack for being bastions of liberalism, the situation only seems more precarious. One also wonders, as many colleges and universities have at least partially adopted some of these practices, whether these innovations remain unique in the higher education landscape. We therefore must ask whether such "educational Edens" can or should survive in these times. Do they contribute something critical to education and culture, or are they the relics of an outdated vision, a "paradise lost," no longer relevant to our perilous times?

In short, amidst our multiple contemporary crises, from the threats of climate change to the rise of anti-democratic populist parties, what role might historically innovative institutions of higher learning play in

preparing students to be dynamic community members and educated and engaged citizens for our times?

By studying students after they leave their "educational Edens," we have learned that programs of individualized-integrative education coupled with strong living-learning communities can empower their alumni to be agents of change for themselves and their communities. While Johnston's playful, artistic, and therapeutic model of education is personalized and leads to self-understanding and individual growth, this does not preclude it from nurturing thoughtful leaders in a broad range of community, civic, or social justice settings. In fact, by helping those students practice their commitments in a smaller experimental space, Johnston can cultivate and empower leaders who know how to make collaborative and sustainable change in their communities.

From our research, we believe that the practices incubated in innovative colleges can be incorporated throughout the broader landscape of higher education. The six characteristics identified in the 2014 Gallup Purdue Index Report of graduates who shape successful futures are pervasive in such institutions:

- Taking a course with a professor who makes learning exciting.
- Working with professors who care about students personally.
- Finding a mentor who encourages students to pursue personal goals.
- Working on a project across several semesters.
- Participating in an internship that applies classroom learning.
- Being active in extracurricular activities. (Great jobs great lives, 2014).

While such practices can be found on many campuses, they are fundamental, intentional, and celebrated at Johnston and similar schools. Psychologist William Damon studies how young people find purpose—how they discover that which is both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, 2008, p. 33). The eloquent voices of alumni in our study affirm that Johnston's unique blend of self-directed learning and self-authorship, responsibility for community, authentic relationships with mentors, negotiation and an emphasis on teaching, enrich not only their education, but also lead to the discovery of their lifelong sense of purpose. Their experiences can inform and inspire educators in all types of colleges and universities.

In this chapter we treat Johnston, our alma mater, as a case study, exploring whether and how this Edenic (or in our own term *eutopian*)[1] education has shaped the civic and social practices of alumni for whom those practices are vital.

We surveyed alumni from each decade since Johnston opened in 1969, and identified and interviewed alumni who have been catalyzed by their Johnston experience to engage in subsequent civic, social justice, and community organizing activities.

Our study relies on three data points. We conducted nearly 50 interviews with alumni, obtained their graduation contracts (narrative documents which described their educational journey) and solicited recent reflections on their graduation contracts. Through our interviews and their reflections, we discovered that deep engagement in the Johnston community prepared them to be civic actors for social change in a variety of contexts. Sometimes this commitment to participate in or organize democratic communities across differences was implicit and ameliorative; other times, it was bold and revolutionary. While Johnston undergraduate experiences are quite diverse—certainly there are students who struggle in the program or do not plumb its depths—for the subset of alumni we studied, their education greatly shaped the way they have created, engaged in, and supported their various communities following graduation.

In the next section we briefly discuss what we mean by Johnston being a *eutopia* (albeit one quite different from those campuses that identify as having explicit civic and social justice commitments as part of their founding vision). We then provide some further background on Johnston, ourselves, and this project. Next, we turn to the interviews with Johnston alumni, staff, and faculty since 2009 to examine how the educational experience shaped their engagement with community, civic, and social justice work. We conclude by reflecting on the service and lessons *eutopian* institutions can provide for the broader landscape of higher education.

Eutopias

Time Magazine missed the opportunity to ask “why” the “New Eden” was created. For Johnston—like its forebears in American innovative higher education such as Black Mountain College, Deep Springs College, and University of Wisconsin’s Experimental College—enacted the ideals

[1] A neologism we will explain in the next section.

of a better way of living and learning on a small scale, to show their significance in practice, and to model their value to others. These schools served as incubators to inspire learners to understand themselves as capable change makers who together can envision and bring into being a better world. The promise of how we can live, learn, recognize, and care for others became a reality on a small scale and, in doing so, challenged the status quo.

Historically innovative communities of higher learning like Johnston transformed Sir Thomas More's pun in ancient Greek, where an ευ/*eu-topos* (good-place) is υ/*u-topos* (no-place). Instead of offering creative pieces of fiction to broaden our moral-imaginative vistas, as Plato and More had done, they created actual communities attempting to practice full visions of the good life. Unlike "utopia" (taken literally) they are "*some*where." They shaped a *eutopian* politics, which "aims at refining human political life through actualizing the 'good life' in a smaller place. It does so to proffer a powerful expansion in the broader culture of the recognition of the dignity of others" (Kramer, 2021, p. 303).

Some *eutopias* are centered around religious and social activism, such as Berea College, which began as a fully integrated interracial and coeducational school in the slaveholding South before the Civil War (Kramer, 2015, pp. 86–107). But some, like Black Mountain College, sought to promote a commitment to individual creative aesthetic projects, far from direct political activism. Yet they too sought to embody values that recognized students and faculty as full persons with deep potential and to model a community that could be a "good place." Also, like Black Mountain College, infamous for its chaotic organization, fights in leadership, deep interpersonal conflicts, precarious finances, and hostility toward the experiment (Duberman, 2009), these communities often struggle to bring those ideals to fruition and sustain them. The process to become a mature *eutopia* is difficult and necessitates continual reflection on whether the community members are truly living their values, if and how to deepen, enrich, or alter them for the current moment, and if and how to atone for failures and set a better future course. It can be a delicate and destabilizing enterprise. While those involved might be far from perfect, and the misadventures at these places may be glaringly obvious, so are their successes and legacy. To be a *eutopia* is not to be perfect, but rather to demonstrate that the multivalent, ongoing aspiration to elevate each other and deepen connections in a quest for growth can work in practice.

As we shall argue, we regard Johnston as a kind of *eutopia*—one characterized by playful, hard-won individual growth in a supportive community, which seeks to recognize and model the dignity of many kinds of learners, empowering them to negotiate their education and indeed, their lives, with others. This community engagement practices democracy as a way of life in the tradition of John Dewey, who famously said,

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 2008a, p. 93)

Johnston, especially through its consensus decision-making processes that views individual difference as essential to reach common ends, manifests Dewey's understanding of democracy. However, for this all to become clearer we need to learn more about Johnston and hear from its alumni, administrators, and faculty.

Johnston in Context

Johnston has combined time-honored, even conservative, educational values with egalitarian pioneering practices. A founding faculty member opined that Johnston's educational purposes, like many liberal arts institutions, has roots in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle: "know yourselves," "develop useful vocations within your societies," and to be "academicians with both breadth and concentration in at least one discipline." But akin to those purposes, he added, Johnston enculturates a special gift for serendipity and *chutzpah* (E. Williams, personal communication, April 8, 2010), fulfilling Jimmy Johnston's mandate, "as long as you're havin' a good time." Not only the vision, but also the pioneering quintessential qualities of a Johnston education have fundamentally remained the same throughout its history: democratic self-governance, student motivation and agency, a living-learning community, negotiation, a consensus process, and enduring relationships between students and faculty.

Johnston is distinctive in inviting each student to shape a personalized path and curriculum. Students create their education by negotiating

individualized contracts both for specific courses and for their entire educational journey. For each course, students design a contract conveying the responsibilities they intend to take on for that class. In order to graduate, they present a graduation contract, a narrative of their experience, tying together their past coursework coupled with classes they intend to take in the second half of their undergraduate experience. Ultimately, in their final year, they meet with a committee of students and professors to demonstrate what they have done. There is self-evaluation at every stage of the process. Each student constructs their own educational path and narrates the story of that path.

A focus on the individual is so characteristic of the school that, initially, when Johnston College became a center of the University of Redlands, it was briefly called the "Johnston Center for Individualized Learning." But as distinct and individualistic as each student's experience may be, one of the hallmarks of Johnston is that those experiences come to fruition and are celebrated in community.

A 2002 graduate who served as an admissions officer for Johnston described to prospective students this balance between personalized learning and communal responsibility by thumbing through a course catalog from a traditional school. "If you go to a school [with a] major that's already been negotiated without you, 'here it is. You follow.' Then I would hold up a blank piece of paper [and] say, '[Here, at Johnston], there's nothing to follow.'" (Interview 50.1.13.15). But along with that metaphor for student agency and self-authorship, he would assure them that a Johnston education cannot be experienced in isolation:

> The contract process involves dialogue with your advisor, your friends, with the actual contract committee. And that's an essential lesson for the world at a lot of levels, from [the] pragmatic to relationships to networking. Those are the two biggest things. That it's not in a vacuum and it's not something you follow… I think that's the DNA of what the Johnston education involves. The blank piece of paper that you have to fill, but not alone. (Interview 50.1.13.15)

In their book, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*, Gerald Grant and David Riesman took note of both the communal and the individual qualities inherent in a Johnston education. Analyzing the experimental undergraduate education movement in the

1960s and exploring its roots in the earlier reforms of the 1920s and 1930s, Grant and Riesman coin the term "telic reform" to describe American institutions of higher education shaped by a forward-looking orientation that can empower students to practice the values they want to see in the world (Grant & Riesman, 1978, pp. 15–17).

The authors distinguished among four types of "telic reform" carried out in the early to middle twentieth century: *Neo-Classical*, *Aesthetic-Expressive*, *Communal-Expressive*, and *Activist-Radical*. Grant and Riesman considered Johnston to be a model of "*Communal-Expressive*" telic reform, characterizing it as the college "that perhaps went furthest in grounding itself in [T-group[2] or encounter group] techniques." Noting the pervasive T-Groups and psychological orientation in its inception, they see evidence of a religious or mystical quality—"the desire to experience unity and to find mutual growth in the support of a group, through openness to others" (Grant & Riesman, 1978, pp. 25–28). Even after the T-groups that defined the early years of Johnston waned, interest in transpersonal psychology, a commitment to the living-learning community, and relationships between students and mentors remain central to the Johnston experience.

That religious or mystical quality, the commitment to community, and enduring relationships with faculty binds many alumni to the institution long after receiving their degrees. This is certainly true in our case, which we turn to next.

Authors in Context

The two of us were students in two different eras and incarnations—Patricia graduated from Johnston College in 1976 and Eli from the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies in 2012—yet we experienced the same passion and pedagogy in our education and recognize not only how it set us on our life journeys, but also how that education continues to animate us.

[The following section was written by Patricia Karlin-Neumann]

As a first-generation college student and the only one of my siblings to have studied past high school, I owe a rich and fulfilling life to my mentors

[2] T-groups or training groups, sometimes called sensitivity training groups are groups where participants learn about themselves through their interactions with one another during the group meetings.

at Johnston. Knowing well my passions and commitments and trusting the promise they saw in me, professors at Johnston suggested that I become a rabbi. At the time, only one woman had been ordained, and I didn't yet know about her. So, armed with a healthy dose of *chutzpah*, a conviction about the centrality of belonging to a community where every voice is valued borne of my Johnston experience, and a narrative transcript with a concentration in "Nonviolent Social Change," I applied to rabbinic school and embarked upon a career as a university chaplain, hoping to provide for other students the care, loyalty, and mentoring that I was the grateful beneficiary of at Johnston.

The seeds for this project—examining the relationship between a Johnston education and engagement in communal and civic life—were planted at a reunion celebrating the 40th anniversary of the founding of Johnston. After multiple conversations with fellow alumni who were ardent about making the world a better place in their personal and professional lives, I wondered whether Johnston played a role in leading so many alumni, like me, to be engaged in community, civic life, and social justice.

To be sure, there are many Johnston graduates for whom the connection between individual and community has led in directions other than explicit civic or social justice work. Most of the founding and current faculty would agree with Grant and Riesman's characterization of Johnston as an example of the *Communal-Expressive* rather than as an *Activist-Radical* telic reform like Antioch College.

Yet, those reunion conversations prompted the question: Was there something within Johnston's educational model, in the paradoxical blend of *expressive* individualized learning married with a *communal* commitment to democratic governance and community participation, that laid the groundwork for a commitment to civic or social justice work?

Knowing little history and philosophy of experimental or innovative education beyond my own experience, I proposed to facilitate a seminar at Johnston to explore with students the literature and history of experimenting colleges and universities in America, for which the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) generously provided a grant.

Co-author, Eli Kramer, now an associate professor of philosophy, was an undergraduate in that 2010 seminar, "Outdated or Underrated: Exploring Experimenting Colleges and Universities in America." We studied the historical precedents, legacies, and contemporary experiences of innovative, progressive schools and hosted two community-wide

experiences. The first, with L. Jackson Newell, President Emeritus of Deep Springs College and one of the foremost researchers and teachers of what we call *eutopian* higher education, was a far-ranging discussion of the promise and problems of, in his parlance, “maverick” colleges. The second, the highlight of the semester, was a Founder’s Night—a luminous evening where current students met those who conceived and birthed Johnston, and those founders got to see how their dreams have taken root in the newest generation of Johnstonians. Several of our own luminaries, now, sadly no longer with us, were present, regaling us with stories of the birth pangs of Johnston College.

[The following section was written by Eli Kramer]

That course was pivotal in shaping my life path. After graduating from high school feeling burned out from my K-12 experiences, I knew I wanted something different. I was lucky to have chosen Johnston to be my home. It was the first place where my independent streak and desire for supported self-development in a rich intellectual environment was fully nourished. However, it was only in the class with Patricia that a calling emerged for me. I was amazed to learn that there was such a rich history to whole person humane education, including the pedagogy and curricular structures that in Johnston I had come to love, such as the living-learning community, interdisciplinary curriculum, democratic governance, and qualitative assessment. And yet, I was shocked that most of higher education seemed ignorant that these practices were not simply insights from the last couple of decades, and was dismayed at the trite way it seemed many campuses tried to put them into practice. I was also inspired that some brilliant luminaries and ideas were fostered or at least contributed to these schools, from Coretta Scott King and Clifford Geertz at Antioch to Josef Albers and John Cage at Black Mountain College, from the work-campus/free tuition model at Berea to the experiential learning models at Prescott. These places seemed like refuges in the wilderness to me that more people ought to have known and cared about. Since then, I have become a scholar and teacher of the history and philosophy of higher education, with a specialty in these *eutopian* communities of higher learning. I have created unique interdisciplinary research projects doing site visits and interviews of folks at many kinds of innovative institutions of humane learning and have been lucky enough to teach at some of them.

*   *   *

As a result of the "Outdated or Underrated" seminar at Johnston, we became partners in this project. Reflecting on our shared experiences in innovative learning, and recognizing how many classmates and alumni of different eras were engaged in improving their communities, we began to ask questions such as:

- How do alumni at Johnston understand the relationship between their education and civic engagement or social change? How have they brought their education into the world?
- Is there a throughline between Johnston's *Communal/Expressive* telic pedagogy and social justice?
- How might experimental pedagogy be reproduced and scaled for conventional institutions of higher education?

From our own history we knew that Johnston could be transformative and catalyze a career of action and engagement to make meaningful change in the world. It is to other alumni who found civic engagement or social justice to be salient in their own lives that we have turned in trying to understand the association between their education and their commitments.

Our Study in Context

Our study benefits from examining three points of data over time—graduation contracts written by students when they were undergraduates, interviews with alumni over the past decade, and their subsequent reflections on those contracts. Our research is supplemented by a compendium of contemporary alumni and faculty essays, *Snapshot/50: The Johnston Community 1969–2019* (Brody et al., 2019), published to honor the 50th year of Johnston's history.[3]

We also conducted a survey of Johnston alumni. Of the 119 survey respondents, roughly 76% attended in the second half of Johnston's history. About 60% attended Johnston for their entire undergraduate years

[3] *Snapshot/50: The Johnston Community 1969–2019* (2019) is the third of three volumes about Johnston, following *"As long as you're havin' a good time": A History of Johnston College 1969–1979* by founding faculty, William McDonald and Kevin O'Neill (1998) and *Hard Travelin' and Still Havin' a Good Time: Innovative Living and Learning in the Johnston Center 1979–2004*, edited by Bill McDonald and Kathy Ogren (2004).

and graduated from Johnston. While the reasons students chose the school varied, this sentiment was frequently expressed:

> I felt empowered and challenged by an educational program that allowed—well, required—my ownership. As I was attempting to claim the same agency in other aspects of my life at the time (coming out of an experiential-learning senior year in [a] Denver high school), I was intrigued by the opportunity to do the same with my upcoming college education. Also, while I was a high-performer academically (and was valedictorian of my class), I wasn't motivated by grades, so a program that didn't have them was very attractive. (Survey Respondent 98)

Around 86% of those surveyed described "student ownership of learning" as an "essential" part of their Johnston journey. Further, 71% of respondents said the "living-learning community" aspect of their education was "essential." Johnston seems to cultivate strong individuals while creating a robust community life. Our research suggests that autonomous critical thinkers and strong community life are not mutually exclusive. Although it may seem paradoxical, even to students during their Johnston experience, our findings suggest that they mutually reinforce each other.

Alumni Interviews: The Johnston Experience

While Johnston was briefly referred to as a "Center for Individualized Learning," for more than two decades it has been more accurately known as the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies. For it is the integration of academic and community, of personal and intellectual exploration that has emerged repeatedly in alumni recollections.

A 2006 alumna prefaced her graduation contract with these thoughts,

> In true Johnstonian and living-learning fashion, I cannot separate the academic from the personal. In explaining what I study and why, it is apparent to me that my schoolwork is full of my life and what matters most to me. A paper I write, a project I present, a single paragraph I read over and over, a discussion I have in class or a professor's office; these events are always personal because they are independent yet intertwined explorations of *what* I see, do, and think about every day, and ways of understanding—the constant shifts in focus and blurring of lenses—that both reflect and alter *how* I see, do and think. This is what makes me ask questions. (Graduation Contract Reflection 27.7.28.14)

While these sentiments may resonate with undergraduates on traditional campuses, it is rare that they are proclaimed, respected, and preserved in the academic record.

At Johnston, students have historically paired with faculty to share the teaching. Faculty mentors are accessible, their office doors in the student residences open for connection. Educator James Boobar, '02 who co-taught with several different professors as a Johnston student, appreciated the value of "gaining individual 'authorship' of learning, enjoying a dialogic relationship with faculty, and engaging with community" (As cited in Ogren, 2019, p. 58). Just as beneficial as students find co-teaching, professors prize engaging in authentic learning with young scholars, expanding their own content knowledge, and practicing interdisciplinarity. In this way, students and teachers create moments of learning that recognize each other as whole developing persons, worthy of a nurturing environment for self- and communal transformation.

Johnston's flexible system of contracts, a structure providing for mutual responsibility within the classroom, inculcates democratic learning. Founding faculty member and former director, Yasuyuki Owada, in his own self-reflective anthropology of Johnston, noted,

> The students as learners were to *initiate* action toward the faculty who, as facilitators, would *respond* to the students. This was the feature that defined the contract system of learning as a social vehicle of the Johnston symbols and that presented the system as being diametrically opposed to the traditional, post-figurative mode of education. (Owada, 1981, p 133)

In the contract-based curriculum, empowering student learners to be dialogue partners with faculty within and beyond the classroom is an essential building block of the community, lending *eutopian* contrast to the too often disempowering broader higher education system.

The process of evaluation, too, instills authority and mutual responsibility. Based on their course contracts, students appraise their own commitment and learning as well as that of the instructor. Taking their evaluations into consideration when writing narrative student evaluations, the instructor attends to the personal and communal goals which students enumerated in the class contracts. Students are thus active shapers, rather than merely consumers, of the learning environment.

Similarly, in order to graduate, each student writes and presents to a committee of students and faculty a graduation contract describing the

trajectory and story of their educational vision, and the courses they propose or have taken to fulfill it. This living document serves as a blueprint for the remainder of the student's Johnston experience.

The student returns to a Graduation Review Committee in their last year—practically, to oversee the completion of the Graduation Contract, but ritually, to celebrate and endorse the educational journey the student has undertaken at Johnston.

Johnston students' concentrations or emphases rarely sound like standard majors. Those written by some of the alumni we interviewed range from, "Art Therapy and Buddhism: Contemplative Practice through the Visual and Poetic Arts" to "History, Social Change and the Radical Tradition;" from "The Poetics and Pedagogy of Sexuality" to "Diplomacy." But whatever the emphasis, the culture at Johnston provides opportunities and models to develop students' unique angles of vision and creativity, as well as to practice democracy in both community meetings and the classroom, to negotiate and to work collaboratively, to take initiative, and to assume a commitment to life-long learning.

As 2003 alumna Cole Cohen has commented,

> Over the past fifty years and into the future, Johnston students and alums maintain certain characteristics that have led us to believe that we should take charge of our own education. We are single-minded, unquenchably curious, and helplessly quirky… We wouldn't let anyone else tell us how to think, so we left behind homes and families to join an educational commune. (Cohen, 2019, pp. 101–102)

Each of the last words in that description is equally resonant. The personally tailored education so highly valued by this and other students is balanced by—and sometimes in tension with—a fierce commitment to participating in a democratic living-learning community whose norms and constraints are argued, determined, and enforced, together. Self-governance (i.e., Deweyan democracy as a way of life)—by tradition, through consensus—requires attention to the needs of others. It provides profound lessons in civic responsibility, negotiating, not only academics, but life together. It is in community that the Johnston belief—that intellectual growth is intertwined with emotional and spiritual growth—is most powerfully instilled.

Alumni Interviews: The Legacy of Johnston

Upon rereading his 1974 graduation contract, a clergy leader who pioneered a thoughtful structure for helping individuals develop religious depth and strengthen community asserted, “It was audacity that produced me: the audacity of the experiment not to focus on verification in the strictest sense. It was the audacity of professors who connected both personally and intellectually with their students and signed on to the growth of the complete person, myself included” (Graduation Contract Reflection 31.1.16.15).

Jan Hoffman, a 1973 graduate—one of the earliest Johnston students, who became a celebrated criminal defense attorney, proudly calls herself, “one of the bad girls.” She recalled,

> We had such academic freedom, and the responsibility for our education was on each of us as individuals. It ultimately developed my confidence to not be afraid of academic challenges—or any other challenges for that matter… We also had to be willing to fail. Iconic figures like Steve Jobs are willing to take risks, and a Johnston education sets up someone for that. (As cited in Gallardo, 2020)

After reading her graduation contract from 1977, an award-winning professor of education wrote,

> Throughout my career, particularly as a teacher educator, I have had one mantra: we don’t teach subjects like math or history or English or Art; we teach kids. My students have repeated that statement to me for decades: “Here is the best thing I learned from you—we don’t teach subjects; we teach kids.” I was stunned when I read the words from my 20-year-old self in the grad contract: “*I believe that each student in a classroom should be able to expect to walk away with at least some self-knowledge and/or some self-acceptance. This faith assumes that teaching is not only Math or English or History; it is people. If that can be remembered, the struggle to be a good teacher is already won*.”

She mused, “I had absolutely no idea how deeply the roots of the core philosophy of my teaching actually went” (Graduation Contract Reflection 22.1.13.15).

A 2006 graduate, an arts activist who at the time of her interview was living with three other Johnston graduates explains that, nearly a decade after graduation,

> We very much function as an intentional community and a family of sorts.… We all do different things professionally.… There are points of intersection and a commonality, not just in terms of personal or political values that Johnston supported… but also the perpetuation of engaged critical thinking… we push each other to not be lazy about the world around us and our responsibility. (Interview 27.7.28.14)

The quasi-religious *Communal-Expressive* embrace of the living-learning community provides fertile soil for democratic and civic engagement, service, and social justice for many Johnston alumni. While the school was not founded upon civic commitments like some *eutopian* colleges, the commitments of maverick colleges like Johnston to "democratic self-governance, personal responsibility and the study of the liberal arts and sciences" (Newell, 2015, p. xiv), seems to have fostered in some alumni who were deeply engaged in the program, communal awareness, and implicit civic responsibility. It instills a pervasive and long-lasting sense of what can be done together in the present to live one's values and to envision a better world.

A 1978 graduate, an entrepreneur who became an award-winning climate activist explains that one of the enduring lessons of his undergraduate experience is that Johnston "personalizes justice."

> One of the things that I think is so powerful with Johnston was that it was small and personal, and because of that, all of these issues become very real, because you see them one way or another, affecting the people you live with, or are in a family with, essentially. I mean, I don't know how you would come out of there and be selfish… But I just think that that kind of intensity of contact and experience lasts for a long time. Not only is it addictive, but it can't help but make you take the condition of the world personally.… I'm an entrepreneur by nature, and I think Johnston creates entrepreneurs.… I came away with a feeling that the things I see being wrong, it's up to me to do something about that. I can't do everything at once, but I have to take it on. I mean the small business owners I met who got those awards, every single one of us said, "Okay, I've got to do something about climate change. Oh look! I have a resource. I have a business and that means I can. I have a certain kind of influence. I'm going to use it. Now, I have an opportunity to

> tell others about it to help them use it too". And that kind of thing is sort of an entrepreneurial approach to making the world better. I can't imagine going to any of the other colleges I applied to and coming out with anything like that feeling. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

A 1997 graduate who joined the Marine Corps and now works in law enforcement draws a throughline from his engagement with the Johnston community to his commitment to public service. "Virtually every Johnston student will take the shirt off their back to protect or to defend or to come to the aid of another… student when truly necessary. It's almost ingrained in you as a Johnston student from… that first day, that when we need to come together as a community, we will do that. We'll sound the trumpet, and we'll have that 10 PM community meeting and we'll be there until hours in the morning. That's the sole purpose of the Marine Corps, but I saw that so many times in Johnston" (Interview 24.7.30.15).

The education professor retired from her position, but not from pursuing educational equity. Upon reflecting on her graduation contract, she comments,

> As I explored the roots of my passion for fighting for justice and voice for high school students in the rural, suburban, and inner-city high schools at which I taught, and for students, staff, and faculty at my university, I realized that Johnston was the place where those early seeds were nurtured and bloomed.

Further,

> When I retired, I truly believed that it was time to hang up my sword and allow my horse to graze in the pasture. I'm beginning to see that when I am confronted with injustice, I have to polish the sword and whistle for the horse once again. I feel that in tracing the arc of my involvement in giving voice, speaking out, supporting, and taking action over the course of my career, Johnston is the central link, the place where I learned that sitting back and being quiet is unacceptable. One doesn't just talk about injustice; one acts. For me, that's the Johnston legacy. (Graduation Contract Reflection 22.1.13.15)

For a 1978 graduate, an Irish Catholic physician who worked in Indian country, started a global health organization, treated Ebola patients in Sierra Leone, and oversaw public health in the Department of Defense,

refusing to accept the world as it is has permeated her education and medical practice. As one of a few women in medical school in the 1970s, she reflected,

> I didn't feel like anybody at my medical school was like me. Maybe a very few people. We… started a [program for underserved people] in my medical school class. I think I was able to do that because of Johnston… I knew how to organize; I knew how to talk to people. I knew how to move things along.

This initiative was clear from the start of her medical education. "My first year of medical school, we didn't have any nutrition so what do I do? I start a nutrition class, right? Why wouldn't I do that? I'm coming from Johnston. Wednesdays at noon… I have a… series of ten lectures."

As she soon experienced, challenging the status quo can meet stiff resistance:

> I get called into the dean… "What are you doing? You're not allowed to do that. We don't teach nutrition for a reason." I said, "Well, what would that reason be? We all need to learn nutrition and people are coming who want to learn about nutrition." Oh, my goodness, you would have thought I was from outer space…. I didn't want to control the curriculum, I just wanted to learn nutrition. (Interview 33.7.31.15)

As in this case, Johnston alumni often are prepared to meet such situations head on with strong negotiation skills and a well-honed sense of humor. Asked about the roots of her commitment to public service, she said, "I am committed to equity and social justice. I don't know if that came from Johnston but what I know is that Johnston let me believe that it was okay to feel that way and to have that be a North Star for me. I have had many, many experiences in medicine that left to their own institutional devices, would have tried to tear that out of me" (Interview 33.7.31.15).

Alumni Interviews: Negotiating in the Workplace

Negotiation skills refined through Johnston's academic practice of course and graduation contracts have been a touchstone for several of our interviewees. A founding faculty member, known for his intellectually challenging classes nevertheless values the practical education students receive:

> It's a very entrepreneurial place, it's a very "real world" place. Students are constantly having to negotiate their way through situations in which their gift of gab and their thoughtfulness matter. So, they're selling programs to committee or to another faculty member, making their case, always making their case. And that's very "real world". They get written evaluations. Nobody in the real world gets grades; that's an artificial system confined to schools. But you've had plenty of narrative evaluations written about you. That's what the real world is. I play that up. I play up what people really learn here. They get prepared for graduate school; they get prepared for the world. (Interview 5.11.9.09)

Indeed, a former Johnston admissions counselor once quipped that one of the selling points of Johnston is that graduates find ways to get jobs they are not (yet) qualified for! A 2005 alumna explained that negotiation enabled her to do just that:

> I have to say the permission to negotiate anything, and the permission to say, "I'll write a resume and submit it and do an interview and nail this job because I can figure out what you need from me." Right? The flexibility that Johnston inspires in, I hope most people in the program, allows you to step out into the world with the notion, probably the little bizarre, privileged notion, that nothing is off-limits. That is the only thing that I look back on the decisions I made immediately right after graduating… that decision of, "I can do this, I can figure this out. I can negotiate this" was the absolute key in building a future. Full stop. (Interview 34.7.12.14)

Not surprisingly, an entrepreneurial place generates entrepreneurs. The 1978 graduate who is a business owner and climate activist discussed how he intentionally brings the egalitarian spirit and personalized orientation of Johnston to his company:

> Being a business owner creates a hierarchy immediately. You're the person who signs the paychecks. So that's a tough role to create community with. I tried to create as "Johnstony" a business as I could figure out to do. I told the staff I don't want there to be a division between work and life. I made sure every day to demonstrate to people that they can disagree with me and it's cool, as long as we hang in there and stick it out. I think that's one of the most important things about Johnston. That and the entrepreneurial spirit. My education never stopped. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

As a recognized leader in his field, he describes facilitating a small business roundtable of Climate Leadership Awardees in which they affirmed the values that motivated them:

> I asked them, "Why did you do it? Why did you embark on an environmental mission?" And every person there told a story that was personal, about not wanting to impact the health of their family, their kids, or they see what's changing in the world, and how awful it is, and how unjust it is, and they just can't abide it. And so, they're going to invest in using their business as a tool to do something about it. Every single one. But not one person said, "I see an economic advantage in doing this." Not one of them. They all did it for intrinsic reasons. I turned to the audience, and I said, "Is this what you expect to hear from business owners?" And they said, "Oh, God, no! I never heard such a thing!" Right, but it's the truth in the small business world. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

Having spoken very personally about his own motivations at a meeting convened by this alumnus, the microphone went around the room for people to share their stories. Eventually, a disabled Gulf War veteran rose to speak. He had been down and out and had been inspired by the salvaging and recycling of people living on the street. He started a recycling business based on that model. In telling his story at the roundtable, he commented, "I can't tell you how amazing it is to be in a business meeting where I can talk about what I really care about."

Our alumnus continued,

> That, I think, is exactly Johnstonian… People have desires and goals, and they're communitarian, and they're familial and it isn't about me, me, me. By and large we need to make our world more Johnston. I think Johnston gives you courage, wherever you are, to make that move. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

Alumni Interviews: Empowering Those Committed to Social Justice

For three classmates and former housemates in the same city, who graduated from 2002 to 2004, each intending to become creative writers and instead became community organizers, Johnston's role in fostering social engagement was nuanced:

> The three of us, creative writers, changing the world—by not writing!… I think that there's a certain quality or character, that is, for the person that gets drawn to it, and I think through the living-learning environment… you become politicized into thinking about things communally. I think that is the launching point for many folks into a broader social justice framework.… Johnston is kind of like a petri dish. We kind of [were] playing around with social change on a very, very, very microscopic level and I look back at that and I think, man, all that time I was trying to improve that tiny, little, mostly white, wealthy community. (Interview 25.8.4.14)

He continued,

> [The Academic Director invited me to teach]… graphic design to the Boys and Girls Club in the community, which was predominantly low income people… of color, and I had this kind of aha moment. "Wow!… there's a bigger world out there." I think that Johnston does a good job of bringing in the right people and then giving them the right framework to move on to do that work. (Interview 25.8.4.14)

Another of that trio echoed Grant and Riesman's *Communal-Expressive* telos, when she said, "I think there will always be personal transformation and personal growth. Hands down, yes. Even if you took nothing out of Johnston, you come out of Johnston knowing yourself in some kind of way that you didn't going in."

She went on:

> I don't think we put anything in our structure to guarantee [a social justice awakening] but there's so many things in our structure that guarantee you will know yourself personally and individually better.… folks who are looking for [a social justice orientation] or have the potential for that, or come into that framework… it will rocket you out, but… for someone who wasn't looking for that at all, [I don't think] that it really guarantees you will find it. (Interview 36.8.4.14)

Nina Fernando, a 2011 alumna who works in the faith-based community to build bridges across differences did find her calling at Johnston. She shared how the practices of Johnston and the process of self-knowledge contributed to her commitment to social justice.

> At the end of every course, we write self-evaluations, course evaluations, and we receive narrative evaluations instead of grades. And so, in that process we're constantly paying attention to our strengths, weaknesses. We're acknowledging the areas that we need to grow in. And then we're also learning to share and utilize and pay attention to our talents, gifts, and skills for the betterment of ourselves and our development, as well as for the community.
>
> So, of course, that translates into social justice people, constantly being intentional about our whole world.
>
> Another aspect is community. We have this living-learning community, the cultivation of this desire, commitment, and passion and responsibility to engage with those who are, who think, who act different than ourselves.
>
> And another element to our education is a cross-cultural experience. We don't have traditional requirements, that the University would, say in an English Department or a Math Department. But we do have requirements like this cross-cultural experience. And for me, what I see that as are creating moments of disequilibrium, it's moments where you can put yourself into a place of discomfort. Where you're not the majority, where you're caused to humble yourself, to be in a place where you can listen, just engage in that way, which cultivates open-mindedness, critical thinking, curiosity.
>
> We have a depth and breadth component to our contracts. We go in depth, for me—social change and music and religious studies, but then there's the breadth aspect to open myself to other possibilities. With integrative studies, individualized settings, independent studies. Not just accepting what you've been told, not just following the crowd, thinking outside of the box, particularly in questioning the norm, not being afraid to break the mold, being intentional, deconstructing our own self, in order to better understand all those pieces again, which is inherently transformational. And so, what we do, what we learn, and what we become, translates into how we are in the world. (Fernando, 2014)

A 2005 alumna embodies the *expressive* telos, focusing on creativity in public service positions in her professional and avocational life. She identifies an openness at Johnston for affirming that creativity:

> I think the openness of the Johnston community, even in the willingness to let you flounder and fail, it allows you to build or flex that creative muscle in

> a way that other programs will say "Great! You're eighteen. Here's the book, don't think outside of it." It trains the way that you think about ideas and think about your interactions with them. Even though a lot of us may have spent time floundering and failing and now looking back and saying, "That may not have been the best use of my time," the habit of that creativity is more active. (Interview 34.7.12.14)

A 1993 graduate who entered Johnston with a strong commitment to social justice and works as a seasoned community organizer affirms how fully a Johnston education enabled his own process of discernment and self-understanding:

> I sense that the graduation contract process, writing it, proposing it, going before a committee, and a grad review, really forces you to articulate what the importance is of what you're studying and why. Both what it means to you, and what it means to the world, which is very different than just meeting the requirements of a given major. I think that experience is really important, and also something that you could export… I think it forces you to think of education in a different way. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

When this graduate, who has dedicated his life to pursuing justice, was asked whether Johnston fosters a commitment to social transformation, he expressed ambivalence:

> I don't know. It's certainly good preparation for working on social transformation. It's also good preparation for working on business or creative projects or anything else where people need to interact with each other in groups. I don't know if there's anything inherent in the process of Johnston that awakens people toward social transformation. Certainly, there are plenty of people that went to other kinds of colleges who either came or left with strong activist, or social justice orientations. It's also relatively physically isolated from large urban centers. Mostly white, in a pretty privileged location, which again isn't inherent to any of the methodology and things.
>
> In that sense, I was in really powerful dialogue with people, but with a pretty narrow slice of the world, and had to work pretty consciously to be engaged with more of the world or a more diverse group of people, with most of the people who are directly affected by the problems that I care most about. I don't know that it either gave or took away a social consciousness, or social ideas from people. Although, I think it was a useful place to explore and develop them. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

These insights are consistent with the equivocal perspective we've gleaned. On the one hand, the question we asked in our survey, "I am or was involved in social justice, civic or community activities," had a mixed response. We cannot claim a significant increase, or decrease, in self-identified commitments to social justice or civic activism attributable to a Johnston education. On the other hand, while the evidence may not be able to affirm that a Johnston education (or perhaps other *eutopian* educational experiences) promotes civic or social justice activism, it clearly provides a supportive community environment for students to courageously practice communal care, mutual responsibility, consideration for others, and living with integrity. As we have previously noted, there is a great diversity of Johnston experiences. While some alumni have explicit commitments to civic and social justice work, which their Johnston education served well, many others don't. However, even alumni who do not identify as being actively civically engaged or working in social justice settings shared that they are energized by intentionally belonging to, deepening, and often leading, their respective communities. For those who do exercise those commitments in a recognized civic or social justice context, the living-learning experience enables them to flourish and refine their critical praxis by carrying out their values on the micro scale.

What we want to highlight here across the experiences of alumni who engaged deeply in their Johnston education is that they cultivate a certain approach to participating in, supporting, and leading their communities. In doing so, they practice Deweyan democracy—by attending to each of the members of their community as full persons with rich views and needs, and by developing consensus-based decisions to achieve common ends. This too, we contend is a kind of foundational civic and social justice practice. It lends, as we hope to further demonstrate, to the ability of communities to make beneficial lasting changes and to furthering their shared values.

Alumni Interviews: Learning Consensus-Based Community Organizing

Artist and academic Lisa Beth Robinson, a 1991 alumna, explained that she learned at Johnston "an empathy for the world met with a conviction and intelligence that we could change it, and the analytical skills to make things happen" (Robinson, 2019, p. 54).

Nina Fernando, a 2011 alumna whose emphasis was "Social Change through Music and Religious Studies," asserts that she embodies her graduation narrative daily:

> I see how religion plays a role in shaping and moving society, for better and for worse. I've worked as a multifaith community organizer, educating, organizing and mobilizing religious leaders of all traditions to stand in solidarity with workers, immigrants, and those impacted by hate and discrimination. I made the choice to work with people who don't look or think like me to make our communities more just and equitable. I still sing and write music too: at protests, vigils and congregations, as well as bars, weddings, and my living room. This intersection, my emphasis, continues to unfold in new ways. And it is because of Johnston that I know now how to be intentional about it. (Fernando, 2019, p. 250)

Johnston calls people with a strong sense of agency and among them are those who bring or develop a self-identified social justice, civic, or public service orientation. Once on campus, the support of their *eutopian* educational community throughout their undergraduate experience helps them hone skills for their future vocation.

In her essay, "Owning our Education," faculty member Kathy Ogren quotes a 1992 alumnus, Chris Mangham, who, as a student, co-taught a class on African American Literature in 1991. He reflects,

> Reading, seeing and talking about lives other than my own in a context where one is explicitly charged with membership in a community created a dynamic where what I was reading translated directly into inquiry and empathy with those I lived among. (As cited in Ogren, 2019, p. 58)

A 1974 alumnus was clear that, more than ideas, how people express their convictions through how they live determines whether social change takes place. "Social change is not an idea, it's a way of being and it's modeling… I'd rather see a lesson than hear one any day. I'd rather you walk with me than merely show the way. It's a pebble in the pond" (Interview 31.12.29.14).

Indeed, in a small, informal, egalitarian setting where community is integral to the undergraduate experience, witnessing people expressing and embodying their convictions can awaken profound connections. This leader is appreciative for a life-long relationship with his faculty mentor, and now, dear friend:

> The phenomenology of having that many adult models of people who are passionate about what they are teaching and learning alongside students. It's hard to have that continuously but what I shared with [him] over the years, when I call him, when he writes me, it's one of the most important ingredients of my well-being. It's a friendship that has transcended every part of life.
>
> That doesn't happen often. We're talking about a relationship that I will take to my grave. That wasn't happenstance, that was by design; that was Johnston's design… This small school etched living into my soul… In terms of criteria for impactful education, mind blowing. Way beyond expectations. (Interview 31.12.29.14)

For many students, lasting relationships were forged through argument, and developed and strengthened in community meetings where the practice of consensus prevailed. Consensus was not always an easy process. The 1993 graduate who has been a community organizer for three decades observed:

> I was at all the community meetings. It was interesting. It felt like on one hand it was big part of the experience, that learning to work and operate in the consensus-based system, both taught interesting and useful lessons for the rest of life. That it was a deeply engaging process. Certainly, all of the learning and other things that took place happened in the context of this community.
>
> On the other hand, also from the first community meeting I was at, there was this sense of crisis: Is the community coming apart? Does consensus work? Is the community as we knew it dead or thriving or does it need to be reborn? Certainly, there was a lot of it that was either troubled or took a long time to do simple things, or in some way myopic or narrowly, not self-centered, but centered to the needs and desires of a very small group of people about it too. I don't want to overly idealize it, but it was certainly a big and important part of the experience. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

And yet, as complex and contentious as consensus can be, many alumni spoke of its significance and attributed their commitment to the community to the process of consensus building. In an essay entitled, "Community in Constraint," 2003 alumna Cole Cohen writes, "Through consensus, we learn that there is a reservoir of compassion, an individual capacity for investing in the needs of others, within each of us that is greater than we

knew" (Cohen, 2019, p. 103). It is through this process of self-critical reflection that students also learn to identify and practice their ideals, for and with one another.

That said, not everyone engaged in social justice found the weekly community meetings to be useful. Some rightly recognized the insularity of the issues that were often addressed. A 1979 alumnus recounted his efforts to bring an important spokesperson for the United Farm Workers to campus and was frustrated and disappointed that fewer than ten people showed up to the program. Yet, he noted, in the same week, two hundred people attended a community meeting "and it's all about dogs" (Interview 23.7.10.15). No doubt there are times when the community gets lost in a myopic focus on itself. Yet, the orientation of communities like Johnston, affirming that the "personal is political," can also lay the foundation for a grounded engagement with broader issues.

Julie Townsend, immediate past Director of the Johnston Center, and Tim Seiber, Johnston '04 and current Director understand that while less consequential concerns are often treated in community meetings, they argue that those issues can provide practice for more fundamental and potentially conflictual social and communal ones:

> Whatever the topic, the deliberative pattern is crucial: issues are brought to the attention of the entire community—faculty, staff and students—and are discussed in a structured format, every week, without fail, throughout the semester. The everyday life of the center, its quotidian difficulties, teach us all how to be better negotiators, advocates, and speakers. They, in some ways, prepare us for emergent and emergency conversations as these topics make their way into our thoughts, our institution, our spaces.
>
> Debates in a consensus community tend to range from the banal to the crucial. Typically, this process is effective at bringing most members of the community into at least passing agreement. The way it functions is to continue open dialogue about an issue until an agreement of all community members present can be achieved. This agreement does not mean that all are exactly in agreement, but rather that all members can live with a collective decision. If a member cannot live with the outcome of a decision, they may block its enforcement until further discussion is had. This process is applied to all proposals, from funding for a dinner to policies regarding racial discourse.

> …the job of a consensus community is to seek creative ways forward that take us out of this either/or dilemma: either the students of color are subject to a racist climate OR white students feel comfortable speaking. The very structure of consensus models acknowledges that binaries cannot adequately address complex social problems. (Townsend & Seiber, 2018, p. 57, 62, and 64)

Current Johnston faculty realize that incoming students may not understand this living-learning component of Johnston's educational philosophy that can transcend socio-political binaries. For that reason, they intentionally create learning opportunities for students to partake fully in it. Former Johnston Director and current professor Kelly Hankin shared,

> I think most students enter into Johnston, not all, but most students enter into Johnston, not understanding the relationship to community, not knowing what they're getting into. And then to see them transform into thinking relationships. How decisions are being manifest in the context of different constituents and communities, within the community. (Kelly Hankin Interview, 12.9.09)

Townsend, who followed Hankin as Johnston Director realized that "first year students have little or no training in a consensus model, in how to speak in public, how to exchange ideas, go in depth and have disagreement and keep moving through that." She organized a salon class, inviting faculty, students, and artists to share work or ideas or performances on a theme, and then use that material to generate an intentional conversation. The model eventually traveled through the community; students who were not in the class have carried forth the concept; it is now embedded in the culture (Julie Townsend Interview, 12.9.09).

As should be clear from our interviews, this training shapes the way alumni do their community organizing work, whether implicitly or explicitly. It has also proven crucial now that Johnston and the University of Redlands serve a much more diverse student body than in previous decades, and must face, with the rest of the country, how to address police brutality, white-supremacy, sexual violence, and other central issues of injustice.

Alumni Interviews: A New Wave of Activism at Johnston

While feminist activism has always been essential to Johnston and was often mentioned as an enduring commitment of our interviewees, in the past decade, deeper and more nuanced questions of gender, sexuality, race, and justice have become more salient on campus, as they have across the higher education landscape. This coincided with the student body of Johnston and the University of Redlands becoming increasingly diverse, serving more local students of non-white heritage. For example, Redlands is now recognized by the State of California as a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI).[4] Faculty have also noted that the students are often initiators and teachers of communal learning around these issues. The recent graduates we interviewed seem to be more intentional in incorporating social justice and public service into their education and their graduation emphases than were previous generations.

In the 2015–2016 academic year, precipitated by an experience of cultural appropriation that galvanized awareness and activism throughout the university, Johnston students envisioned, initiated, and hosted a three-day conference for California campus leaders to explore race and inequality in higher education. The organizers had never attended, let alone planned, such a complex and potentially fraught endeavor (Townsend & Seiber, 2018); consequently, they did what Johnston students do when they want to learn—they created a course to research the issues, sought mentors, and engaged in experiential, *eutopian* education, integrating the academic and the applied. Attendees from other campuses were “in awe of the space we had created as a group and the ability for Johnston and the university to support a conference like ours” (As cited in Yu & Emmons, 2017). On the heels of campus fora and the highly successful conference—the largest student-run conference in Johnston or the University of Redlands history—they contracted for another academic course, educating themselves and future planners to organize subsequent annual conferences and understand more deeply the complexity and possibilities of addressing racial in/justice in higher education.

A 2018 graduate who had been active in the community, and is now a social worker, participated in the leadership of the Race on Campus

[4] See https://www.hacu.net/assnfe/cv.asp?ID=4875, assessed on October 5, 2022.

conference for multiple years. She drew a direct line from Johnston's educational philosophy to the creation of the conference:

> A Johnston education was necessary for this to happen because we were all practiced in thinking outside the box, being engaged with our learning and also, knowing that our lives and learning, what happens in and out of the classroom, are not separate. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

Like many other alumni, she highlights the importance of the communal orientation of Johnston for engagement in social justice work:

> This is different than taking a Race and Ethnic Studies class in a mostly white university. It's not the same as talking about race in an abstract way. It's talking about it as a community issue… these are the ways that this is impacting our community.… That gets people's attention in a different way. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

This alumna identified Johnston's tradition of consensus as central to her commitment to racial justice:

> I think real consensus is anti-racist work. It's making sure that everybody's needs are met and that we are all considering everyone, even if they're only one voice. This is the work of being able to communicate with each other when there's a mess or there's harm… Johnston asks people to care about community—it's a core tenet of being there—and caring about community means caring about everyone, learning about people who are different from you and not just in a theoretical way, but through living with them. Consensus is really about taking everyone's needs into consideration, building empathy and awareness and critical thought—all things that you need to be centered in social justice. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

The 2016 graduate who raised his voice to call attention to cultural ignorance and subsequently conceived and spurred the community to shape the Race on Campus conference discussed how his devotion to the Johnston community undergirded his leadership and his desire to make change:

> James Baldwin talks about this a lot… I love this place. This place that I love and has taught me so much is so behind in terms of diversity and race… it's a predominantly white space, a second and third generation college student white space, so people are timid about this. I love this place and this place is lacking here and I want to change that. And actually, even the people who

are timid about this, they care. I can see, they're like, "I don't know how to talk about this, but I'm going to show up. I care about you though so I'm going to take this seriously, not just, I care about this because I should, but because I love you and I love this place." (Interview 54.7.13.22)

He further affirmed that participating in the public square at Johnston made it possible, not only to dive into a major effort for which he had no prior experience, but also to navigate the complex terrain of racial in/justice:

> I think Johnston is such a skill-building place and I don't think it gets a lot of credit for that explicitly. I think… innovation in this work [of racial justice] is always morphing and multi-faceted. Multi-faceted problems and solutions, you can't get that from rigid forms of education. I think you have to be in places where… [you're] able to think in a multi-prong setting and apply some of these learnings to these amorphous issues… How do I look at this problem and what are other people considering, or what am I not considering? How can I think about this differently? I have the skills to think about it differently. Johnston has equipped me with a really sharp lens of critical thought that builds itself well to work around social justice… Johnston's kind of learning lends itself to having so many windows of opportunity for people to transform themselves. (Interview 54.7.13.22)

The initiator of the Race on Campus conference also reflected movingly about the transformative power of listening thoughtfully and fully to others, a quality greatly appreciated in his ongoing professional work educating on diversity, equity, and inclusion:

> Johnston prepared me so well for this new field of work that is social justice oriented. I'm learning how rare of a skill it is to be a critical thinker and attentive listener… When moments of tension arise in the world, people ask, "Who's going to handle this conversation?" There are so many people at Johnston who could facilitate a conversation like that or be a good listener and contribute and ask good questions that open up a conversation further… Johnston continues to nourish me. (Interview 54.7.13.22)

An early admissions poster for Johnston declared: "Johnston College does not aim simply to be different. Its goal is to make a difference… in education, in the lives of its members, in the world we live." As these alumni affirm, for over half a century, Johnston has continued to fulfill that promise.

Lessons for an Uncertain Future

One of the intentions of this volume is to be useful to schools that do not identify as "maverick" or "progressive" but are open to initiatives that affirm the ideals of innovative-*eutopian* education. Every campus has its own culture. Upon inquiring what qualities of their Johnston education might translate to the broader realm of higher education, nearly all our interviewees referenced student agency and self-authorship, the living-learning community, the quality of relationships with mentors, and the emphasis on the art of teaching.

A 2005 alumnus understood that many of the best practices in higher education can be found throughout the landscape and appreciated having so many of them in one place:

> Johnston brings together every best practice that matters in higher education: small class sizes, relevant learning, contact with professors, collaborative relationships with colleagues, deepenings on community and what it means to be a citizen of the world, and intellectual inquiry with and without ego, etc. Most everyone I know found some aspect of this experience at an array of other types of colleges, but rarely all in one place as we were so privileged to have. It was also all right there for us when we walked in the door; we didn't have to seek it out as others I know are forced to do at more traditional institutions. The amazing experience and learning is not unique to Johnston, it's just a lot easier to have once you arrive. (Interview 32.12.22.15)

That said, some alumni had conflicting beliefs about whether such learning is simply harder, or perhaps even available, elsewhere. A 1991 graduate who became an educator, and who himself teaches in a progressive college, initially insisted that Johnston's pedagogy would not translate to traditional institutions:

> My experience is that it doesn't work piecemeal. That the beauty of Johnston is that you have an entire system, an entire community that is reinforcing that system. So, it is the ecosystem or the atmosphere in which everybody operates… If you're an individual instructor you can make marginal progress, but… I'm swimming upstream.

Yet, even as he argued, he realized that certain elements of Johnston's education, such as narrative evaluations and discourse across difference, were fundamental to and integrated into his own pedagogy, and to the

leadership he provides to his colleagues to help them innovate and improve their own teaching (Interview 38.1.7.15).

Other interviewees were encouraging about translating Johnston's practices to traditional campuses, as even this skeptical alumnus partially conceded. A college professor who spent his undergraduate years at a large state university came to know Johnston both through family members who had been undergraduates there as well as through his own participation in Johnston alumni summer seminars. He identified the qualities of Johnston learners that inspired him, which he emulated in his own teaching. He spoke of

> a common respect for hearing out diverse voices and patiently listening rather than jumping in and dominating conversation. The Johnston model encourages patience, and self-expression, which asserts one's view without shutting others out. It allows innovation from younger people, who plan their education, rather than consume it from teachers. Professors are more partners and mentors and serve as role models. This active exchange, and placement of trust in students… brings confidence to Johnstonians nurtured and supported to take their ideas, and those of their peers and mentors, seriously (but seasoned with humor and communal camaraderie). The experimental education is simply that: giving students more say in how they want to attain knowledge and cultivate wisdom. (Survey Respondent 97)

The 1993 graduate who has worked as a community organizer throughout his career and remains an avid reader of literature and faithful attender of Johnston summer seminars, which bring together generations of former students to study with beloved faculty, noted how fortunate he was to have such excellent teachers. He acknowledges that equally gifted educators can be found wherever teaching is valued:

> There's just a quality to the teaching of many of the great teachers that I had at Johnston that I think probably exist in some times and places in addition, but was definitely valued and heightened there. That teaching as an art is just really valued, and that professors who had real intellectual pursuits of their own were really deeply engaged with students. That has to do with that teaching being valued in Johnston and in Redlands, to be fair. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

He also recognized that peers from other small schools may have received many of the same benefits he did:

> The system for negotiating contracts, for helping to design classes, for doing consensus-based work, it was certainly different from how things worked at other colleges, and I think good preparation for doing both community organizing, and activist stuff, and other professional work for the rest of life, and going to graduate school. I think at the time and for years I felt like that was really unique to Johnston. From more years later I'm not sure. I think I see it now as more contiguous with what people's experiences was in many small, private colleges. That it's maybe more a matter of degree than kind. That level of attention and being able to have agency, essentially. Having smarter and much better educated people take your ideas really seriously when you're between eighteen and twenty-two, which is something that a small, private college does to you. From a little farther distance, I think maybe it's a matter of degree more so than a totally different experience. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

Matt Gray, a 2005 graduate, wrote that Johnston matters to him even more now than when he was a student. He describes how he teaches others the power of consensus and integrity in his professional life, how he builds coalitions to make change in his civic life and how he passes on to his children the Johnston ethos of collaboration, intelligence, and kindness in his family life. But as much as he appreciates his past and present, his experiences make him hopeful for the future:

> This is where my individual story is not so individual. As I look around at my classmates from Johnston, I see them out living lives they designed, fought for, and negotiated. Johnston gave us the skills necessary to create such lives.
>
> So while it's fun to wander down memory lane and celebrate the good times, it's even more invigorating to look toward the horizon, where the impact of Johnston can be seen in every aspect of our lives. Johnston matters now because of what it has allowed us to do, but even more important, Johnston matters because of the world that Johnston and the Johnston Alumni Community are out creating every day. (Gray, 2019, pp. 226–227)

These alumni are bringing the skills and the ideals they practiced at Johnston to encourage and embolden learners, leaders, and citizens within and beyond higher education. While such practices may change with time and context, they are fostered by understanding students to be civic partners, treating them with a passion and conviction that the whole person

matters and that ongoing dialogue across difference makes possible communities built on authenticity and integrity.

Current and emeriti Johnston faculty members who were trained and taught in research universities and liberal arts colleges believe that much of what works at Johnston translates well to other campuses—excellent teaching, caring for the whole student, providing opportunities to flesh out their ideas and develop new knowledge, and helping them to attain the tools they need to engage with the world. One encourages her colleagues in more traditional institutions to be open to structural change, to incorporate pedagogy into their thinking about their own research, and to enjoy the gifts of collaboration both within and beyond the disciplines they are trained in (Interview 9.11.9.09). Another sees Johnston as profoundly American in the tradition of Brook Farm and the history of American communal life. He hopes that the qualities of entrepreneurship, innovation, and negotiation will flourish elsewhere (Interview 5.11.9.09).

Another described his role as an educator as

> keeping on a knife's edge between a very reactionary business or conservative business of teaching people established skills that keep the people with power in power—how to write, use footnotes properly, how to do bibliographies. All those standardized skills… you have to teach these to people to give people a voice going into the larger world.
>
> At the same time, one of my other responsibilities as a Johnston professor is to teach people how to use these in a disruptive way. In a way that they can present the case for what they are doing with their lives. For those people who Derrida calls the "specters," who in the dominant discourse are relegated to the status of ghosts, of people who aren't taken seriously, who don't really exist.
>
> I think one of the most gratifying things about Johnston is it taught people to get out in the world and negotiate and speak eloquently for those who were silenced, for the ghosts, people who, increasingly in this corporate world, are becoming less and less physical, less and less taken seriously except as a scapegoat to the far right, who condemn them for moral lassitude and corruption. So, one of the great things Johnston does is create people who really want to embrace the cause of silent people. In a country that I think is rapidly losing hope of a sense that individual citizens can make a difference, we keep producing people who have that kind of crazy hope which is just as wild and as colorful as the dreams that pushed Jack Kerouac and

> Thomas Wolfe, that got me turned on when I was fifteen, twenty. I think we do an okay job, despite our own limitations. (O'Neill, 2014)

Our alumni interviewees are a testament to Johnston doing far more than "an okay job." They have embodied the democratic values that prepared them to maintain hope and strengthen community. So do many other schools. Most institutions of higher learning are adept at the first responsibility articulated here; many faculty are committed to the second one as well. What historically *eutopian* schools such as Johnston, with student-centered, holistic, character-driven, and personalized pedagogy practiced in democratic communities, can provide is strength to maintain the ideals that underpin higher education and courage to keep them alive even in dark periods in our history.

In the 1930s, an earlier dark period, Alexander Meiklejohn, who conceived and created The Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin—a precursor to many of the experimental schools of the 1960s—understood how essential it was to teach students to be educated citizens, to be free, to take their place in a democracy. He wrote,

> Far deeper, then, than any question of curriculum or teaching method or determining conditions is the problem of restoring the courage of Americans, academic or non-academic, for the facing of the essential issues of life. How can it be brought about that the teachers in our colleges and universities shall see themselves, not only as the servants of scholarship, but also, in a far deeper sense, as the creators of the national intelligence? If they lose courage in that endeavor, in whom may we expect to find it? Intelligence, wisdom, sensitiveness, generosity, these cannot be set aside from our planning, to be, as it were, byproducts of the scholarly pursuits. They are the ends which all our scholarship and teaching serve. (Meiklejohn, 2001, p. 318)

Restoring the courage of Americans for facing the essential issues of life. Helping teachers in higher education to see themselves as creators of the national intelligence. Interrogating what and for whom our scholarship and teaching serves. These *eutopian* imperatives live on.

The lesson from the experience of Johnston, then, is not merely whether some of the unique structures of this mode of education can be incorporated into other settings; it is essential to cultivate an *eutopian* ethos, to promote an environment for the whole person to be both educator and

educated, inspiring those within it to articulate and actualize a vision of a more equitable, just, and thoughtful world.

While there are no easy solutions for these perilous times, we are heartened that the road traversed by innovators in higher education from Alexander Meiklejohn to the present, heightening awareness of the problems and possibilities in our communities and country, preparing young people to create a world with more opportunity and openness, and educating citizens—has become better traveled.[5] A bedrock belief of higher education is the promise of a better future. John Dewey reminds us, "democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife" (Dewey, 2008b, p. 139). As we journey through new territory discovering more about the wisdom and courage that historically innovative schools have instilled in their alumni,[6] we look forward to the higher education community fulfilling its vast potential as guardians of democracy, custodians of the past, and architects of and midwives to a worthy future.

References

Brody, L., Forys, M., Maloney, M. G., & Slaughter, A. (2019). *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019*. Ebhon Press.

Cohen, C. (2019). Community in constraint. In L. Brody, M. Forys, M. G. Maloney, & A. Slaughter (Eds.), *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019* (pp. 101–104). Ebhon Press.

Colleges-The New Eden. (1969, October 3). *Time Magazine*. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,901523,00.html

Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. Free Press.

Daniels, R. (2021). *What universities owe democracy*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dewey, J. (2008a). *The middle works of John Dewey, 1899–1924: Democracy and education, 1916* (Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 9) (J. A. Boydston, Ed.). Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (2008b). The need of an industrial education in an industrial democracy. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *The middle works of John Dewey, 1899–1924: Journal*

[5] See, for example, Ron Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021); or National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement (2012).

[6] We plan an extended monograph to trace more fully some of the stories we have touched on in this essay.

articles, essays, and miscellany published in the 1916–1917 period (Collected Works of John Dewey, vol. 10) (pp. 137–143). Southern Illinois University Press.
Duberman, M. (2009). *Black mountain: An exploration in community*. Northwestern University Press.
Fernando, N. (2014, March 15). *Philosophy of alternative higher education in practice—Negotiating social change and community in a non-ideal world* [Conference presentation]. Philosophy of Education Society 70th Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, NM, USA.
Fernando, N. (2019). Interconnecting intersections. In L. Brody, M. Forys, M. G. Maloney, & A. Slaughter (Eds.), *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019* (pp. 249–250). Ebhon Press.
Gallardo, L. (2020, March 26). *One of the bad girls*. Bulldog Blog. https://www.redlands.edu/bulldog-blog/2020/march-2020/one-of-the-bad-girls/
Grant, G., & Riesman, D. (1978). *The perpetual dream: Reform and experiment in the American college*. University of Chicago Press.
Gray, M. (2019). Why Johnston matters now. In L. Brody, M. Forys, M. G. Maloney, & A. Slaughter (Eds.), *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019* (pp. 225–228). Ebhon Press.
Great jobs great lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue index report, a study of more than 30,000 college graduates across the U.S. (2014). Gallup Purdue. https://www.gallup.com/services/176768/2014-gallup-purdue-index-report.aspx
Kliewer, J. R. (1999). *The innovative campus: Nurturing the distinctive learning environment*. Oryx Press.
Kramer, E. (2015). *Utopia and human culture: Alternative communities of higher learning in America* (Master's thesis). Southern Illinois University Carbondale. https://www.academia.edu/36683143/UTOPIA_AND_HUMAN_CULTURE_ALTERNATIVE_COMMUNITIES_OF_HIGHER_LEARNING_IN_AMERICA
Kramer, E. (2021). *Intercultural modes of philosophy, volume one: Principles to guide philosophical community*. Brill.
Kramer, E., & Fried, R. (2021). The meaning of a liberal arts and sciences education in the United States: Anachronistic lessons from a parochial past. *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, *3*(1), 41–66.
McDonald, B., & Ogren, K. (Eds.). (2004). *Hard travelin' and still havin' a good time: Innovative living and learning in the Johnston Center 1979–2004*. Trafford Press.
McDonald, W., & O'Neill, K. (1998). *As long as you're havin' a good time: A history of Johnston college 1969–1979*. Forum Books.
Meiklejohn, A. (2001). *The experimental college*. University of Wisconsin Press.
National Task Force on civic learning and engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future, a national call to action*. The Global Perspective Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Newell, L. J. (2015). *The electric edge of academe: The saga of Lucien L. Nunn and Deep Springs College*. University of Utah Press.

O'Neill, K. (2014, March 15). *Philosophy of alternative higher education in practice—Negotiating social change and community in a non-ideal world* [Conference presentation]. Philosophy of Education Society 70th Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, NM, USA.

Ogren, K. (2019). Owning our education. In L. Brody, M. Forys, M. G. Maloney, & A. Slaughter (Eds.), *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019* (pp. 57–60). Ebhon Press.

Owada, Y. (1981, Spring). Prefigurative education: A discovery at Johnston college. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 21*(2), 129–140.

Robinson, L. B. (2019). Johnston 50. In L. Brody, M. Forys, M. G. Maloney, & A. Slaughter (Eds.), *Snapshot/50: The Johnston community 1969–2019* (pp. 53–54). Ebhon Press.

Townsend, J., & Seiber, T. (2018). A place to practice: Incivility, curriculum and institutional intelligence. *The Journal of School and Society, 5*(1), 54–66.

Yu, H., & Emmons, K. (2017, March 27). *Get woke, get active: Race on campus conference*. Redlands Bulldog. https://theredlandsbulldog.com/get-woke-get-active-race-campus-conference/