

A peculiar trip on wild academic seas

Something for Everybody Is Not Enough

An Educator's Search for his Education.
By William M. Birenbaum.
293 pp. New York: Random House. \$7.95.

By NEIL POSTMAN

Generally speaking, books by college presidents are artifacts on the day of their publication. They are like shards of ancient pottery: One must record their existence and occasionally exhibit them, but, of course, one does not actually expect to use them for anything. William Birenbaum's book about his own education is a delightful and amazing exception. It is not only useful, it is entertaining and vastly alive. So much so that if Birenbaum doesn't shape up, it will probably be necessary to expel him, for a decade or two, from the society of college administrators.

As a matter of fact, something like that has already been tried, most dramatically when Birenbaum was provost at Long Island University and R. Gordon Hoxie was its peripatetic chancellor. Hoxie's attempt to remove Birenbaum resulted in an extended student strike, which Birenbaum correctly characterizes as "one of the most effective and longest student strikes in the history of American higher education."

Well, then, who is William Birenbaum, and why are students so fierce to save his job? At the moment, he is president of Staten Island Community College. Before that, he held administrative posts not only at L.I.U. but at the University of Chicago, Wayne State and The New School (where he was dean). He also headed a project, sponsored by Robert Kennedy, to create a new college in Bedford-Stuyvesant. All this within a relatively few years, which is to say that Birenbaum is like most school administrators in that he moves nervously from one job to another in search of enlarged prestige, challenge and ulcers.

But right there, most of the similarity ends. For one thing, Birenbaum was bar mitzvahed in Waterloo, Iowa, which fact, all by itself, makes him strange. If that isn't enough, his wife is a genius (so he says); he has a serious commitment to the aspirations of the poor and disaffected; he thinks that schools are for students, and he actually believes that student strikes may be significant learning experiences. Further, he gets off lines

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like these: "The world of graduate education, I imagine, is what our whole planet would be like if the 'best' products of the academic Establishment ever took over. It is a world not quite to be believed—like, say, Saturn. It is a thing of beauty to behold, with its spectacular research-and-publication rings, and its rainbow-hued grantsmanship and reduced-teaching-load surface. But insofar as we know, it is wholly unfit for human habitation. A nice place to visit, I guess, but I'd sure hate to live there."

Or these (on coming to New York to be dean of The New School): "The New York Post reporter was charmed by the fact that I had arrived in New York, she thought, from Iowa. Consequently, when the paper devoted its profile column to my arrival, it reduced all of my brilliant achievements in Detroit and Chicago . . . to an obscure line or two, featuring instead the patent absurdity of the situation: a New School dean harvested, literally, out of a corn field in the remote West somewhere. The reporter gave me the impression that Greenwich Village had never taken in an Indian before."

"Something for Everybody Is Not Enough" is a more or less leisurely account of Birenbaum's life. It is filled with anecdotes about his upbringing in Waterloo, his army experience, his student career, and mostly, his peculiar trip on the wild academic seas. Occasionally, Birenbaum does lapse into a presidential lecture (addressing Posterity), but never for more than a paragraph. Mainly, he is concerned to convey what it feels like to be among the unloved—that is, a college bureaucrat. For example, what it feels like to tell Malcolm X that The New School is withdrawing an invitation it had extended to him. Or what it feels like to negotiate a reception for LeRoi Jones. Or what it feels like to try to start a college—with Robert Kennedy alternately at your side and on your back. Or what it feels like to get fired.

It is this emphasis on the human dimension of administration that gives to the book its usefulness. In the customary rhetoric of education reform, the world is nicely divided into Us (those who want to change the System) and Them (those who don't), and no one need wonder which pronoun stands for "the administration." For those content to talk about change, that view of the process may



Photograph by Eric Cato.

suffice—to comfort us, if nothing else. But for those who are really serious about getting something done, Birenbaum's book offers a more functional perspective on the dynamics of change. For Birenbaum makes one see, if nothing else, that the Us-Them construction bears very little relationship to the way things really are. Everybody not only has an Establishment to deal with, but everybody, it seems, is someone else's Establishment. In other words, in Birenbaum's book, we meet the enemy, and he is us. ■

*Top: Dr. William M. Birenbaum,
president of Staten Island
Community College.*

*Bottom: Jonathan Kozol with
a pupil in one of the Free
Schools in Boston's South End.*



Photograph by Christopher Knight.