A Collage of Colleges

“Why should all of the creative and liberating ideas for liberal education be left to the small residential liberal arts colleges?” That is the question, posed by Plummer professor of Christian morals Peter J. Gomes, with which the curriculum-review Committee on General Education concluded its report. “[W]e could be both Harvard University and Williams College,” Gomes opined, expressing the hope that a research university could embed close faculty-student interaction, lively instruction, and classroom exchanges ranking with America’s best.

By chance, on November 4, two days after the release of the committee report, presidents, deans, and senior faculty members from 14 colleges and universities (including Harvard) met at the Graduate School of Education to launch a five-year “Forum for Excellence and Innovation in Higher Education.” The forum, organized by Gale professor of education Richard J. Light and funded by the Spencer Foundation (whose president, Michael S. McPherson, is president emeritus of Macalester College), encourages experiments to improve teaching, learning, and student life at eight liberal-arts colleges, four universities, and two start-up campuses.

To these familiar aims the forum adds a new one: rigorous assessment of outcomes. Drawing on his experience at Macalester and, earlier, at Williams College, McPherson said, “We experiment all the time, we just never look at the results.” Evaluation is central to the aims here. And because the participating institutions will pursue their ideas and report their findings together, they have a rare opportunity to learn and to share insights across campuses.

The participants’ proposals suggest the diverse experiments under way in American higher education, alongside Harvard’s attempt to address the undergraduate curriculum wholesale. Among them:

• Hands-on engineering. Students are required to take studios in which they engage with real clients (urban bicycle couriers, nurses), identify their practical needs, and design engineering solutions. Students acquire communications skills by making frequent presentations.

• Research service learning. A university engages students majoring in fields such as economics in service-oriented research, based on fieldwork, in a course sequence beginning with econometrics and extending through honors thesis presentations.

• Teaching teachers. A liberal-arts college will try to improve student skills by training teachers to become better writing instructors.

• Mathematics laboratory. An institute groups students to explore mathematical problems together, working through their uncertainties, discovering theorems from the bottom up, explaining their findings to peers, and then detailing their work in a paper and required revision.

• Science success. Another college invites students who are interested in science and mathematics, but lack preparation, to a multiweek summer program, before freshman year, to learn how to work in groups, operate in a lab, and build relationships with a faculty adviser.

A context for these and other ideas was provided by Harvard president emeritus Derek C. Bok, who shared with the forum prepublication copies of his new book, Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More (Princeton University Press).

Absent clear discussion about the aims of undergraduate education, and measures of institutions’ efficacy in helping students learn and develop, Bok writes, “However much professors care about their teaching, nothing forces them or their academic leaders to reexamine familiar forms of instruction and experiment with new pedagogic methods in an effort to help all their students to advance.” He rues the relegation of teaching essential skills (writing, foreign languages) to junior, underpaid staff members, and the lack of focus on questions of values, about which students are highly curious. And he questions the incentives underlying the environment in which “subject matter triumphs over pedagogy.”

For all the heated debates among educators about what subjects to require and how to structure concentrations, Bok’s extensively footnoted argument concludes from current educational research that “the arrangement of courses per se has little effect on the development of critical thinking. What matters more is the way in which courses are taught and the effort students and faculty devote to the educational process.” He hopes for “an eventual shift in American colleges away from a teacher-oriented system featuring lectures delivered to passive audiences toward active student involvement and processes based on deeper understanding of human learning.

If they are serious about really educating undergraduates well, Bok concludes, the onus is on faculties to overcome “their reluctance even to discuss issues of pedagogy, their disinterest in research on student learning, and their unwillingness to pay attention to much of what goes on outside the classroom.” At present, “faculty seem inclined to use research and experimentation to understand and improve every institution, process, and human activity except their own.”