

📖 Nairobi College 📖

John Egerton

For almost a decade frustration over the manifold deficiencies of American higher education has been spawning new attempts to change the structure. Free universities, storefront colleges, and alternative schools have blossomed all across the landscape. Most of them have faded as fast as they bloomed. Nairobi College, which began its third year in 1971, is a notable exception. It has not yet become all that its statement of purpose (quoted below) envisions, but it may well have moved farther along that road than any other recent venture of its type.

"The cities and colleges of this country are in disrepair. Many of those who would rebuild them would tear them down first. Nairobi College is an alternative to tearing down. It is an alternative to an educational system which serves many people badly and people of color not at all.

"Nairobi College comes out of the unmet needs of peoples of color for education but is open to all students who find it a viable educational alternative. It will not level buildings which are still functional to create a walled-off fortress of hallowed learning; it will not destroy a student's culture to replace it with one that fits him badly; it will not separate generation from generation or race from race so that one may climb on the shaky foundation of the ruins of the other; it will not strip students of their dignity or their ability to determine their own destinies, forcing them to follow a leadership they neither understand nor respect; it will not consider itself above the analysis of its product by those it seeks to serve.

"Nairobi College is being designed to produce what communities of color need: doctors, lawyers, engineers, skilled businessmen, capable technicians, and able public officials and social scientists who are a part of the community that they intend to serve and who serve the community while they develop their expertise.

"Nairobi College is being designed with the belief that col-

leges can be built without walls, that they can be . . . a part of the communities they serve. It is being designed with the belief that colleges can be governed by the communities, the students, and the faculty they serve, that they can bridge the gap between knowledge and action by being institutions which initiate and participate in the activities of the communities building themselves and their peoples. It is designed with the belief that the college and its students serve the community and are evaluated by the community. Nairobi College is designed with the belief that no one need destroy his past or strip himself of his dignity to become a liberated human being."

The word *alternative* seems naturally to belong in the description of Nairobi. In its makeup as well as in its philosophy, it is a Black institution, and thus an alternative to white-dominated colleges and universities. As a separate, independent, and unaffiliated school, it operates outside the system of established institutions, public and private. And because it is, to quote its statement of purpose, "an alternative to tearing down," it has set for itself the formidable task of proving that destruction and anarchy are not necessary prerequisites to revolutionary change.

Since it opened in 1969, Nairobi has changed rapidly in several ways, but its basic objective is the same: to develop Black leadership in and for a Black community. Its intent is to provide two years of academic training and a whole lifetime of psychological reeducation for Black citizens of East Palo Alto, California, a low-income community separated by a freeway from its opulent neighbors in San Mateo County, south of San Francisco. East Palo Alto is an unincorporated community of about 25,000 people, over 80 percent of them Black. It is not an urban slum, in the way that sections of Chicago or Newark are, and its people are not poor like the rural poor of Mississippi; it is simply a neglected and underdeveloped appendage of one of the nation's richest counties. The contrast is visible and stark.

One of East Palo Alto's citizens is Robert Hoover, a thirty-nine-year-old North Carolinian who went west in the late 1950s to do graduate work at San Jose State College and Stanford University (Stanford is barely two miles away, across the freeway) and for awhile was involved in a program for minority students at the College of San Mateo, a junior college in the California network

of two-year institutions. The latter experience was punctuated by turbulence and conflict, and Hoover came out of it determined to provide Black students with another option. "When I was at the College of San Mateo," he recalls, "I used to say the purpose of our program was to train leaders to build Black communities. The college people always insisted that wasn't the college's job, but I said, 'Why not? You do it for white people all the time.'" Hoover was convinced that the college was both unwilling and unable to meet the basic academic and psychological needs of Black and Chicano students, and Nairobi College came into being as a result of that conviction.

With \$80,000 raised from private sources, Hoover and a handful of colleagues—mostly Blacks, but including some whites and Chicanos—opened the school in 1969 in a house in East Palo Alto. They had over one hundred students in classes scattered throughout the community and a volunteer faculty drawn from neighboring institutions and from nonacademic sources. No one—including Hoover, the college's first president—drew a salary; the budget was used for rent, utilities, supplies, books, and student aid. The curriculum was a mixture of routine and radical: English, Swahili, mathematics, leadership development, Black psychology, political awareness. Students over eighteen were admitted without regard to their prior academic record, and they were involved fully in decision making and administration, including faculty and student selection, curriculum development, and fiscal matters. Community involvement was also an integral part of the structure: students were given work-study assignments in East Palo Alto, and local citizens participated in governance of the college.

Several white people were engaged in administrative work, a number of others taught courses, and three whites were in the student body. There were also from the beginning some important, if informal, ties with various departments at Stanford. But Nairobi's ideological orientation was distinctly nonwhite. It was a third-world college, for "people of color"—black, brown, red, and yellow. It originally had plans for developing additional campuses in Redwood City, Daly City, South San Francisco, San Francisco's Chinatown, and Alcatraz—all communities where there are concentrations of Chicanos, Indians, Chinese, or other nonwhites.

As an inevitable consequence of the collective experiences

of Nairobi's nonwhite majority—and as a reflection of the temper of the times—antiwhite sentiment was strong. As time passed, most of the whites who were connected with the college either dropped out or were pushed out. But in spite of these tensions, Nairobi never got caught in ideological quicksand, thanks largely to the maturity and equilibrium of the organizers. There was Black rage and hostility and talk of total estrangement from whites, but Hoover and his colleagues kept the energy focused on building an institution to serve the community, and they managed to keep the college on the course without either separating from or surrendering to outside forces.

There were no white people visibly involved in Nairobi in 1971; yet the college seems to have moved beyond any preoccupation with rhetoric to a more pragmatic stage. Original plans to develop other campuses have not materialized, except that the Chicanos who were once a part of Nairobi have parted company to run their own enterprise—Venceremos College—in nearby Redwood City. Hoover says simply, "We weren't ready for it. The leadership of the two communities was not together. Coalitions between people of color are still important, but the problems are not going to be solved anytime soon. Meanwhile, we have to remember that our first priority is to build this community."

Hoover's perception of Black nationalism finds expression in community building. He makes a clear distinction between the nuts-and-bolts work of developing self-sufficient communities and the theoretical abstractions of nation-building in the grand design. It is not that Black nationalism or pan-Africanism or third-world nation-building are concepts of no interest to him; it is rather that East Palo Alto is a sort of practical application of those ideologies, and he is more interested in the application—in economic, political, social, and educational self-determination—than in the theory. He and the other molders of Nairobi have kept themselves occupied with their college, their town, its population, its problems, and its relationship to the rest of San Mateo County. They want to see Nairobi produce young people who are academically and psychologically prepared to move into other institutions for further training and then come back to contribute to East Palo Alto's development. That has been its basic mission and its primary objective from the first.

In 1971 Nairobi had about three hundred students, still

scattered in classrooms throughout the community, and offered more than sixty courses between the hours of 8 A.M. and 9 P.M. five days a week. For the most part, it was a meat-and-potatoes curriculum—business administration, music, English, French, Swahili, African and Afro-American literature, education, mathematics, physics, biology, and a good selection of social science courses, including several which focus on Black interest. There were nine full-time faculty members, nine full-time staff members (several of whom also teach a course or two), and about a dozen volunteer faculty members who teach part time. Nairobi operated on a budget of approximately \$285,000 in 1971–1972. About 60 percent of this came from federal grants and loans—Work-Study, EOG, NDSL, Talent Search, and Student Special Services. The rest came from private donations.

Donald Smothers, a twenty-six-year-old East Palo Alto resident, serves as president, and Robert Hoover is director of academic affairs, a position which frees him from much of the day-to-day administrative responsibility so that he can teach two courses (in education and political awareness) and spend more time on community involvements and long-range planning for the college. Smothers, a graduate of San Francisco State College, is one of eight Nairobi faculty and staff members who once were enrolled in the minority-student program that Hoover ran at the College of San Mateo.

Nairobi enrolls slightly more men than women students, and the average age of the student body is about twenty-five—an indication that middle-aged people as well as young adults are attending. There are still no entrance requirements. The college charges its students \$600 a year, but financial aid—including all costs, even books and supplies—is provided, and about 95 percent of the students get some form of assistance. All the students are Black, and a substantial minority of them now come from outside East Palo Alto, including six from Africa. The college has aspirations of building formal ties with some African countries and stimulating a two-way flow of students and faculty. Closer to home, Nairobi still maintains working relationships with several departments at Stanford for various kinds of technical assistance, and in 1971–1972 about a dozen Nairobi graduates transferred to junior-year degree

programs at Stanford, the University of California at Berkeley, and the California State Universities at San Jose and Hayward.

Although Nairobi's curriculum, class structure, and calendar (quarter system) tend to follow traditional patterns, some interesting new wrinkles have been added. Grades, for example, are A-B-C, but nothing is recorded for those who do not earn a passing grade, and students can repeat courses as many times as necessary to get a better grade. A sort of buddy system is utilized to match students on a one-and-one basis for tutoring, and Friday afternoons are set aside for this activity. On Friday mornings all faculty and staff, as well as many students, are engaged in a wide-ranging convocation that deals with social, political, organizational, and community matters. Between quarters the college community goes on a retreat, where past performance is reviewed and plans are made for the next term of school. And in all of this, the student input is substantial.

The most unusual and impressive characteristics of Nairobi are not in the academic realm, though, important as that is to the students. Most significant—and most worthy of replication elsewhere—are the ways in which the college has made itself a vital part of the community it serves. Its governing board, for example, is made up of three students, three faculty and staff members, and three community residents, chosen by their peers. The main office of the college is located in a shopping center, and negotiations are underway to rent an empty supermarket there and convert it to classroom and office use. A fully licensed child-care center is operated for children of students and staff, free of charge. Several inmates from the Vacaville State Prison have been released to the college; three of them teach, and two others serve as staff members organizing a tutoring and counseling program for Vacaville inmates. The college's talent-search program, called Dig It, recruits high school students and college dropouts and serves as their broker for reentry into higher education at Nairobi or other schools.

Still other kinds of community service are evident. Nairobi is leading a community fight against drug pushers, and against the attending theft problems often found where drug traffic is heavy. Student counseling has become community counseling, not only for educational matters but also for juveniles in trouble with the law,

for welfare mothers, and for others with pressing social needs. The school library, with 20,000 volumes collected by students in a county book drive, has potential as a community resource. Nairobi is not just a college; it is a community-service agency in a community where service is extremely scarce. In many ways it is an institutional ombudsman for citizens of East Palo Alto.

The college has a counterpart alternative institution at the elementary and secondary school level in the Nairobi Day School, begun in 1966 by Gertrude Wilks, a local resident and an exceptional woman in her own right. There is no official connection between the two institutions, but Bob Hoover was the first principal of the day school, and he serves on its board. Hoover is also an elected member of the board of the Ravenswood School District, which encompasses East Palo Alto and the adjoining area. The district has 5500 students, 85 percent of them Black, in eleven schools, seven of which are in East Palo Alto's Black community. Two of the five board members are Black, and Hoover calls it "a pretty good board." He adds: "In the past few years we've had some real change. Before, there were only twenty Black teachers out of 350, one Black man in the central office, and one Black principal. Now we have a Black superintendent, ninety Black teachers, and half of the principals and vice-principals are Black. And the quality of education has gone up—the average youngster in the first three grades is reading above grade level, and we never had that before." If such changes continue, there may no longer be a need for the Nairobi Day School—in which case it will have played a pivotal role as an alternative institution.

Hoover and his colleagues in the college see no such possibility for them. "There is no way we could become a part of the College of San Mateo," he says flatly. "We'd rather close than go the state school route." The reasons are not hard to see. While it is conceivable that the local public school system could become effective enough to obviate the need for Nairobi Day School, it is hard to imagine the College of San Mateo's accommodating itself to the kind of activist role Nairobi College is playing. Nairobi's concerns are focused on East Palo Alto, where fewer than one tenth of San Mateo County's residents live. East Palo Alto is not only unincorporated; it is also without a resident representative on the

county's nine-member, all-white governing board, and it is policed by the county sheriff's department, which is also overwhelmingly white. These matters are a preoccupation with the people of East Palo Alto, including those at Nairobi College, and they draw a direct correlation between the makeup of county government and the laxness of government services in their community. To people like Bob Hoover, that is not an abstract problem to be viewed with academic detachment; it is something to be met head on. The college does just that, aggressively and persistently. It is, in a sense, a political force, pushing for such things as an adequate drainage system and more effective police protection. It wants to get federal funds to build two hundred units of low-cost public housing. And it is probably the leading advocate of East Palo Alto's incorporation as a separate municipality.

Not many colleges do things like that, and it can be convincingly argued that in ordinary circumstances such activities are not proper functions for an academic institution. But East Palo Alto's circumstances are not ordinary, and Nairobi is something more than just a college. It is in the business of community building, training Black people to be leaders in a Black community suffering from the ill effects of racism and absentee government. "A separate Black country inside this country is not a real option," says Hoover, "but Black communities are—they are a reality. This is one of them. So our objectives are the same as they always were: We're trying to rescue people, to give them direction, to bring back skills and expertise to our community. All the rhetoric about revolution, about change—it's no good if you don't know what you're after, and if a lot of talk is all you've got you're not going anywhere."

Nairobi can see its way ahead for about three more years, but the long-range prospects are not favorable for such a risky venture. Obstacles are everywhere. There is, for instance, the matter of funding, a perennial problem now for even the most secure institutions. "Unless the independent Black schools can come together and raise funds from Black communities," Hoover says, "we can't survive." And there is the problem of multiple purposes, of mixing education and politics and ideology and activism. It has been tried before, and the track record is very poor.

Somehow, though, a bet on Nairobi doesn't seem like wast-

ing money. The school has reached "candidate" status in its progression toward accreditation, and a visiting team from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges concluded in 1971 that "Nairobi College is well conceived and psychologically planned to meet its educational objectives in an effective manner. . . . The college is highly creative in utilizing the initiative and motivation of students, faculty, and community to build a strong sense of belonging or family-oriented concept of concern for the college and the community in which it is located and which it serves."

But accreditation is hardly a guarantee of survival, says Hoover: "Our chances of staying alive are very slim, there's no question about it. I think we have about three years to find a mechanism for continued funding. If we haven't got it together by then, we won't make it. But I'm not sweating it. If we can get sixty to one hundred young people ready by then, with all the skills and the training they need, this community will have a priceless asset, and it'll be in good shape whether Nairobi survives or not."

There is no doubt that Nairobi College arouses mixed emotions at best, and fearful hostility at worst, among many white educators, not to mention many white citizens and government officials of San Mateo County. They see an institution apparently intent on breaking all the rules of pedagogy, protocol, and politics that the academic world has painstakingly put together over many long decades, and they seem to hear an antiwhite ideology emanating from an all-Black campus, and all of that must be very disquieting.

Yet after all the reservations about official activism and radical emphasis and antimeritocracy have been registered, the basic form and substance of Nairobi seem to survive intact. It may be physically Blacker now than when it started in 1969, but it is also more pragmatic, more self-confident, and less preoccupied with ideological or exclusively racial considerations. It may yet become stuck between the reef of academics and the rock of activism, but its professed intention is to give people the necessary skills for community reformation, and it has kept to that mission in spite of the temptations of various ideological world views (Black nationalism,

pan-Africanism, third-world unity), and in spite of the pressure for conformity from the white majority.

Nairobi may not last forever, but it did not set out to become an institution for the ages; and as long as it can take care of business without succumbing to the human tendency to make self-preservation the first priority, it will probably continue to build an impressive record of service. Certainly not every college could do what Nairobi is doing. It may even be true that no established institution could survive such a radical alteration. But new institutions serving particular communities could learn much from the East Palo Alto experience. Nairobi is not only an alternative college; it is also an ad hoc institution, existing for a specific purpose until its task is finished. It is an idea worth repeating.



DQU



Peter A. Janssen

DQU is not a typical university, but then it is not trying to serve the typical university student. Its student body consists of about one hundred dropouts, migrants, kids from reservations and East Los Angeles, and anybody else who walks onto its campus, a former army communications base six miles west of Davis, California. It is the first university of its kind in the United States: half American Indian and half Chicano; and it is designed to be fully independent. It has no ties to other institutions—or to most current practices in American higher education. Students can stay for two years and get an Associate of Arts degree or for two weeks and get a certificate. They get credit for taking the usual array of college courses—and for participating in tribal dances or planting corn. In the past, the administration got food for the student cafeteria by trading grass grown on campus for meat slaughtered by a nearby farmer, and sheep still graze just outside the administration building.

The university, which registered its first class in September 1971, was a long time coming. It traces back to the early 1960s when Jack D. Forbes, a Powhatan Indian with a Ph.D. in history and anthropology from the University of Southern California started talking with Carl Gorman, the Navajo artist, about the need