

Foreword

JOHN LOMBARDI AND THE WRITTEN WORD

Each of us builds lives out of the circumstances of our times and the qualities of mind and spirit we can bring to the task. Sometimes the elements of time, place, opportunity, and character combine to produce an exemplary life that stands as a model of accomplishment, integrity, and values, a life whose visible career achievements accurately reflect private values. John Lombardi lived such a life. Born into the complex, rich, and difficult life of the Italian immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn at the beginning of this century, his commitment to family and friends and his fundamental belief in the power of education carried him through a succession of jobs and education to a doctorate in history at Columbia University. When we asked, "Why history?" he replied, "Because that's what we could do in night classes." Fascinated by many topics, he harbored an enthusiasm for mathematics, political thought, and Spanish, and a respect for vocational skills that endured throughout his life. Such an eclectic appreciation for learning served him well in his early instructional career as an instructor at Los Angeles City College where he taught a wide range of subjects including beginning Spanish, math, English, political science, and, of course, history.

But it was Los Angeles City College and the community college movement of which it was a part that captured his imagination and creativity. Over the decades of his involvement with that college, John Lombardi served in almost every academic capacity from beginning instructor to dean of the evening division and then president of the independent Los Angeles City College. This odyssey through the creation and invention of a major community college gave him a perspective and a commitment to the values and the mission of the community college that informed all of his published pieces on this subject.

His own experience gave him an empathy for those pursuing a quality education while balancing jobs and family responsibilities. From observation and experience he acquired a strong commitment to the concept that education should be available to those who can benefit, without charge and without any obstacle other than a willingness to learn and to study. From a life involved with

family, in Brooklyn and in California, he carried an unshakeable sense of obligation for the support and encouragement of all of us. Never able to romanticize the hardships of the past, he devoted his time and energies to helping invent, nurture, and enhance institutions that served students seeking opportunity through education.

Fascinated by and respectful of the printed word, John Lombardi believed in writing with a consistency and intensity that often puzzled his contemporaries and friends. From the first moment, he published articles, beginning as best we can determine with a piece on the cathedrals of Europe. He wrote about archives in California, about the labor movement, and about the press, but from 1944 to 1980 he wrote about community colleges. For John Lombardi, the commitment to achievement required the tangible representation of the written word. In an academic world at some distance from the publish or perish ethic of the university, he sought every opportunity to put his experiences and observations on paper, published, and made available to his colleagues. He read everything, news magazines, professional journals, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, the working papers of The Fund for the Republic, pamphlets, books, and newspapers. And as he read, he would find a quote, an item of data, an idea or a concept, each copied to a scrap of paper, later to reappear as the inspiration for another paper, an illustration of an important concept, or the text for a talk.

Sometimes it appeared that he wrote because of the challenge of it. "Nothing," he would say, "is harder than writing." Although he wrote one substantial historical monograph, *Labor's Voice in the Cabinet*, he thought books were too hard to do, and so he wrote article after article, chapters, presentations for conventions and meetings, little speeches for graduations or capping ceremonies, a prolific output that dwarfs what most university scholars can produce in a lifetime of research and writing. Throughout all these words, painstakingly written and revised in long hand, retyped and revised again and again until they said it just as he wanted, runs a unifying thread of values and themes.

The materials in this collection reflect his work after he left City College and completed his assignment for the Los Angeles Community College District. At UCLA's ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges he found an ideal environment to continue his enthusiasm for the community college through the research and writing that formed such a continuing part of his life. The themes reflected in this collection have an antecedent in an article, a speech, a presentation at a professional meeting, or one of the ten annual State of the College presentations he prepared for the opening faculty meeting at LACC. Reading through those ten State of the College papers after reviewing the work published under the auspices of the Clearinghouse, each theme researched in depth

and published in those later years can be traced back to an issue, a challenge, or an opportunity that faced the City College community and appeared in one or another of the annual reports to the faculty of LACC.

Throughout John Lombardi's career he focused his energy on problem solving and consensus building about community colleges. Because the community college represented a non-standard higher education institution, many within and outside the college worried about its definition. He wrote articles with titles "Is the Place of the Junior College Assured?" to help define the legitimate role and place of these remarkable institutions. He wrote many pieces on the relationship between transfer and vocational education, drawing first on the experience of LACC and then extending the range of his study to include national experiences. Some of his most widely read pieces dealt with the issues of financing the community colleges, with articles on tuition, the open door, formulas for funding colleges, and responses to financial crises. A graceful and effective administrator, John Lombardi wrote often about management issues beginning with the role and function of chairmen and the balance of faculty and administrative activities, and continuing to include the challenges of collective bargaining and the role of the college trustees.

In all of this work, whether in the State of the College Reports, the many articles in journals, or the ERIC Clearinghouse papers, John Lombardi carried through a continuing commitment to the fundamental mission of the community college. Reflected in speeches and papers—and especially in his work on black power, student unrest, the emergence of black studies, and the issues of tuition and the open door—access and opportunity provided the unifying theme and underlying passion of his community college career.

This commitment appears first, and perhaps most clearly, during his long association with Los Angeles City College, when John Lombardi thought often about the mission and philosophy of LACC and community colleges in general. Drawing on his own experiences he held firmly to the conviction expressed in his 1956 State of the College report that "the mission of the junior college is not, and never has been, to educate the few. From the inception of our college, and from the beginning of the junior college movement, the philosophy has been to educate all who are capable of profiting from the instruction we offer. . . . History abounds with illustrious men and women who, on any selective scheme now known to us, would have been rejected as exceptionally poor risks. . . . Our task, therefore, is far more difficult than that of the institutions which concentrate on the select few." Yet, with his colleagues, he worried about maintenance of high academic standards. In the 1958 State of the College report he commented, "I have taken a great deal of your time on the subject of scholarship in its various aspects because this is vital to us for our survival as a

college. To neglect it is to court disintegration of our educational structure. Rationalization, no matter how carefully stated, will never compensate for shortcomings in the achievements of our students. We cannot tolerate mediocrity and the downgrading of standards.”

Like other educational institutions, LACC confronted dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of its student population. Acutely sensitive to the damaging effects of discriminatory behavior, John Lombardi brought this issue to the forefront in his 1959 State of the College address. “We are in the midst of an ethnic transformation which has brought us large numbers of students comprising many races, nationalities, and religions. . . . Without refining our divisions too minutely, we know that the major ethnic groups consist of Caucasians, Negroes, and Orientals. Our faculty and staff are sympathetic, understanding, and considerate of the aspirations of these diverse, and often underprivileged groups. . . . That we have avoided segregation can be attributed to this fine spirit of service among our faculty and to the absence of prejudice.”

Then, after talking about successful programs for minority students, he continued, “No doubt you are wondering why, if our record has been so good, I spend time talking about so obvious a phenomenon as ethnic diversity among our students. My primary purpose is to bring into the open a topic which is absorbing privately the attention of so many of us. I believe that a situation which is discussed openly loses much of its pretentious quality and enables us to deal with problems arising from it with understanding, intelligence, and judgement. Also, I wish to reaffirm our policy of equality of opportunity for all our students.” Later in the same report he made this rare personal observation, “I believe that in time today’s less privileged groups will make the same advances socially, economically, and educationally that our older immigrant groups made in a previous era. As one who participated in such a development, it would ill behoove me to believe otherwise.”

By the 1963 State of the College, he wrote “The turmoil accompanying the major issue facing American society today [in reference to desegregation and affirmative action] has special significance for our college in its 35th year. On our campus one can observe in miniature some of the problems the community is experiencing, but without the stresses. Although the search for solutions to our problems parallels that of many communities, . . . for us the search requires a similar display of patience and intelligence. . . . As a college with a large proportion of Negro students, we can expect that off-campus demonstrations will concern them. Occasionally this will lead to overt action on campus. . . . Segregation and discrimination are humiliating experiences that leave deep emotional scars.”

The following year in a long section on disadvantaged and low-aptitude students, he stated the problem clearly, “As a community college committed by

law to universal education of high school graduates, we find ourselves in the midst of these economic, social, political dislocations besetting our community. We are involved because we have a high percentage of disadvantaged students. . . . Two questions have been asked and they are basic. Why do we spend so much time on students who seem so obviously not qualified to do college work? And how long will it be necessary to continue such programs? I think you know my answers—I have been giving them to anyone who will listen for some time. I believe we must do what we can to help the disadvantaged students for moral, as well as legal, reasons. . . . Aside from the legal responsibility, there is a growing feeling that many of the disadvantaged and low-aptitude students are such because of previous adverse social, economic, and political conditions; that our community has a responsibility to right the wrongs of the past. . . . On the second question, how long will it be necessary to continue such programs? My answer is, as long as the unfavorable conditions in our urban centers exist.”

Access to higher education always preoccupied John Lombardi, reflecting his own personal struggle for education and his commitment to the open door of the community college. In 1962 he wrote with considerable concern, “The philosophy of junior college education is slowly being changed. . . . During the past five years the open door policy has been modified to the extent that many junior colleges are placing certain entering students on probation and every college has instituted probation and disqualification policies. . . . Now, another change is being advocated, namely, imposing a series of fees on junior college students.” After reviewing the pros and cons of such a fee policy, he continued, “If fees will improve the quality of our student body, a valid educational argument could be made for them; however, fees are likely to give an added advantage to those who have money at the expense of worthy students who have limited financial resources. If the latter results, the gulf will widen between the privileged and the unprivileged. I consider the imposition of fees as a step backward in our long-standing tradition of offering equal opportunities to all our citizens.” In his last annual State of the College address he recognized the changing attitudes toward the college’s open door policy and the continuing debate on this topic when he said, “Probably no issue is more important for the future of our College and for all junior colleges. In many respects the debate parallels the struggle that was waged in our secondary schools when they were opened to all eligible youngsters. The arguments, too, had a similar ring. Then the uneducable were the children of immigrants from the slum neighborhoods in our cities; today, they are the children of Americans living in depressed or segregated neighborhoods of the same cities.”

A consummate idealistic pragmatist, John Lombardi believed in the Golden Rule. Allergic to extravagance and conspicuous consumption, he lived a life

that reflected his own public commitment to the values of hard work, careful husbandry of resources, and consistent pursuit of opportunity and achievement for everyone. Famous for his Spartan ways—he objected when the car manufacturers required us to buy a heater and radio whether we wanted one or not (he didn't want either)—John Lombardi proved unstinting in his support for the education of his children and others. We soon learned that a request for a frivolous item such as a radio or record player would fail when a casual request for books, papers, pencils, typewriters, and the other impedimenta of education would meet with instant and enthusiastic response. These virtues translated themselves into his written word.

John Lombardi wrote a simple, clear, and direct prose. Respectful of the thoughts and words of others, he quoted often from the books, articles, and presentations of scholars and commentators. His discussions of topics such as race relations on campus, finances, academic governance, or vocational education, persuaded because they avoided dramatic rhetoric or exaggerated claims, keeping instead to a carefully documented presentation, filled with facts and data, carrying a message in the persuasion of clarity rather than in the call to arms. The master of a graceful style of understatement, John Lombardi convinced because his style confronted the practical issues, the possible solutions, and the fundamental values rather than the emotional response to imaginary devils and angels.

All of us who learned with him knew that our success was his goal and that his status, standing, or significance concerned him not at all. Students, faculty, staff, administrators, and family found in John Lombardi that rare source of non-judgmental empathy, advice, and support.

Asking no recognition for himself, he found his reward in our achievements.

July 1992

John V. Lombardi

Mary Luciana Lombardi

Janice P. Lombardi