Great Expectations

More than 40 years ago, at the height of the Vietnam War, a bold experiment in higher education got under way at Rutgers. It was called Livingston College. During its formative years, the college’s ideals—from its progressive curriculum to its goal of serving underrepresented students—attracted distinguished faculty from top universities and ushered in the diversity that today is a hallmark of Rutgers.

By Christopher Hann

Leroy Haines first heard about a new college that Rutgers University was starting in the summer of 1969, when a friend stopped by his family’s home in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to encourage him to apply. Haines was intrigued. He had earned an associate’s degree in accounting and business administration and worked full time for two years. Still, he hardly considered himself Rutgers material. “Yeah, right,” he said to his friend. “Like I’m going to get into Rutgers.”

It turns out that Haines was just the sort of student that the new school was looking for. He was a 22-year-old African American, the middle of seven children from a working-class family—his father had been a waiter and maître d’ at two hotels on the Atlantic City boardwalk; his mother was a homemaker. The family budget did not account for a college education. But Rutgers offered Haines a scholarship through a new program for students of economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds called the Educational Opportunity Fund, and in September 1969, he enrolled with the first wave of students at the new Livingston College, located on the former Army base known as Camp Kilmer in Piscataway.

In the years since, Haines has had a front-row seat on the hurly-burly of Livingston’s evolution. That’s because he never left. After graduating in 1971 with a degree in social science, Haines took a job in the student life office and moved into an on-campus apartment. The decades flew by, one position led to another. In May 1997, the college presented him with a cut-glass plaque. “For 25 years of dedication and service to the Livingston College Residence Life Program,” the inscription reads, “and the countless number of people you have guided through the years.” Today, Haines is the assistant director of residence life at Livingston, and he still lives on campus, having spent most of his adult life in the service of his alma mater. And he has seen it all.
Livingston College began as an altogether different place in an altogether different time. In its tumultuous early years, the college served as a living experiment in higher education, a quixotic attempt to provide a new academic experience for a new generation of students—more engaged, activist, even radical. It was, depending on your point of view, the hippie school, the black school, the utopian school, the anarchist school. “It was a campus,” says Rob Snyder LC’77, “too easily defined by its extremes.” As much as it was an actual place, Livingston was an idea—a whole set of brash, untested notions, really, burnished by the white-hot passions that fueled so much of the social upheaval across America in the 1960s. Central to Livingston’s core was its commitment to students such as Haines—students who might otherwise never have access to a college education, including larger-than-ever numbers of minority, or, in the nomenclature of the college, nontraditional students. Livingston thus became the first coed liberal arts college at Rutgers with a special commitment to diversity, the first to create departments of Africana studies, Puerto Rican studies, women’s studies, anthropology, community development, urban studies, and computer science. It was to be independent of Rutgers College, able to hire its own faculty, build its own curriculum, and set its own requirements for admission and graduation. Peter Klein, a philosophy professor who came to Livingston from Colgate University in 1970, remembers the college promoting itself as “academically innovative, multiracial, multiethnic, and explicitly nonexist.”

The fiery ambitions on which Livingston was founded burned like a Roman candle—bright and loud and triumphant, if only for a moment in time. By the mid-1970s, many of the most far-reaching initiatives that defined Livingston’s grand experiment—such as its pass/fail grading policy—were being modified as the school began to veer, if not toward conformity, then toward something that looked a whole lot more traditional. Yet today, more than four decades after Haines and his pioneering classmates first stepped foot on the muddy campus, echoes of Livingston College can be heard across the five Rutgers campuses in New Brunswick and Piscataway, from the racial and ethnic composition of its student body and faculty to the scholarship produced by its groundbreaking academic departments. Every school day, in hundreds of classrooms, for tens of thousands of Rutgers students, the legacy of Livingston lives on. Alumni who entered the college in those early years have reached the height of nearly every imaginable field, and their loyalty to their alma mater seems unyielding. “I loved Livingston,” says Meryl Frank LC’81, who became mayor of Highland Park, New Jersey, and today serves as the U.S. representative to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. “I went on to earn three degrees from Yale, but there was never any doubt in my mind that the education I received at Livingston was superior.”

Planning for Livingston College began around 1965. Gerald Pomper, who served on a planning committee of students and faculty and later became the first chair of the political science department, says that Livingston was meant initially to accommodate an expected surge in enrollment brought on by the children of the baby boom. Yet the founding dean, Ernest Lynton, a Yale-educated physicist who had taught at Rutgers College since 1952, had high expectations. Lynton wanted Livingston to become “the MIT of the social sciences.”
In the late 1960s, before Livingston could even open its doors, riots broke out in Los Angeles, Detroit, and, closer to home, in Plainfield and Newark. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy had been assassinated. The Livingston planners began to question the role of a state university, and they determined that the new college should more closely reflect the changing times. “Some students came for the academically innovative part of Livingston,” Klein says. “Others came for the multiracial, multicultural, and nonsexist parts. For students who were honors students and highly prepared for college, you didn’t need a highly structured curriculum. For students who were not highly prepared, you needed a highly structured curriculum. That was one of the tensions at Livingston.”

Lynton’s ability to recruit a top-flight faculty was due largely to his ability to infect others with the passion he felt for the task at hand. Jerome Aumente, a veteran newspaper reporter with an interest in urban affairs, says he turned down a position at Rutgers College to accept Lynton’s offer to teach at Livingston. “The idea that he was able to really convince me to come to Livingston instead of Rutgers College was the kind of thing he was doing all the time,” Aumente NCAS’59 says. Many of the new hires were (or would become) leading figures in their fields, including the sociologist Irving Horowitz and the anthropologists Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger. The celebrated painter Leon Golub was hired as a professor of art. Eric Krebs RC’66, GSNB’73, an assistant professor of theater arts, later founded the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick. Aumente created Livingston’s Department of Journalism and Urban Communication, the forerunner to today’s Department of Journalism and Media Studies, part of the School of Communication and Information. Barbara Masekela, an assistant professor of English (and the sister of South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela), later became chief of staff to Nelson Mandela and then South Africa’s ambassador to the United States.

For professors of a certain political bent, Livingston had an undeniable appeal. At Colgate, Klein says, he was considered a “flaming radical.” At Livingston? “I was middle of the road. It was a politically progressive faculty, and that’s one reason why I came,” he says. “It was the role that higher education could play in changing the prospects for people in the middle class and lower-middle class and working class.”

Finally, in September 1969, Haines and about 700 other students descended on a campus that was hardly prepared to receive them. Much of Livingston still resembled a construction site. “The only thing open was Quad II,” Haines says. “There was no furniture in the rooms, no landscaping, no lights outside, no locks on the front doors. There were three cots and a card table in the room.”

It was, by all accounts, a freewheeling kind of place that pushed students in new directions. Many white students, raised in the New Jersey suburbs, had never so routinely encountered people of color. Many minority students, unaccustomed to an educational trajectory that was expected to lead to college, struggled to adapt. Everyone, it seemed, sought some measure of free expression. The Vietnam War provided a catalyst—even Dean Lynton described it as “useless and immoral”—but so did many issues central to Livingston’s identity. Faculty meetings often turned into shouting matches. “It was the times,” Haines says, “when students were demanding rights. Black is beautiful, women’s power, gay power—it all converged here. Everyone was fighting for their rights at the same time, and it all seemed to be centered here at Livingston.”

The opening page of the 1972–73 course catalog contained a quote from Frederick Douglass that captured the
Livingston ethos:

*Those who profess to favor freedom yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing the ground; want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters.*

Students demanded equal say in how Livingston would be run. They served with faculty and administrators on the college’s policy-making body. Haines was chosen as a student representative on the admissions committee. “Here I am looking at this application for people to come here, and I never thought I’d be here,” he says. “It was amazing to me that I was being allowed to do this.”

The faculty was often more radical than the students. Pomper laughs when he recalls the faculty meeting at which a group of professors stridently opposed to the war tried to pass a resolution advocating that the university enter into peace talks with North Vietnam. In 1976, Phil Shinnick, a sports studies professor and former Olympic long jumper, went to jail for refusing to cooperate with the FBI in its investigation of the kidnapping of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst. Federal authorities believed Shinnick might have known something about Hearst’s confinement in a Pennsylvania farmhouse two years earlier.

Not surprisingly, the curriculum reflected the college’s mission. It was at Livingston that Haines, who graduated from Atlantic City High School and spent two years at a community college in Wilmington, Delaware, enrolled in the first black studies course that he ever had the opportunity to take. “It was nice to learn about your own history,” he says.

Amid the turbulence of Livingston’s early years, there was music. Lots of music, especially jazz. The music department faculty featured a collection of jazz musicians that was perhaps without peer on any American campus. The eminent bassist Larry Ridley, the department chair, recruited an all-star lineup that included pianist Kenny Barron, tenor saxophonist Frank Foster, guitarist Ted Dunbar, and drummer Freddie Waits—all of whom would amass prolific recording careers. Among the student musicians were vibraphonist Steve Nelson LC’83, MGSA’90 and the alto saxophonist and flutist James Spaulding LC’75. Rosemary Agrista LC’76 remembers the pianist Chick Corea and bassist Stanley Clarke teaching master classes at Livingston. Marty Siederer LC’77 recalls throngs of students gathering outside Tillett Hall on Tuesday afternoons to hear Ridley lead an informal faculty concert. At graduation, remembers Snyder, students marched into the ceremony not to the strain of “Pomp and Circumstance” but to the profoundly funkier beat of the Livingston Jazz Band.

Dean Lynton left Livingston in 1973, replaced by Emmanuel Mesthene, a professor of philosophy who had spent the previous 10 years directing a program at Harvard that explored the impact of technology on American society. For many, the transition marked the beginning of the end of the Livingston administration’s willingness to engage students as equals. Haines remembers Mesthene as a no-nonsense chain-smoker. Slowly, campus life started to turn. The grading policy was changed when Livingston students had trouble getting into graduate schools that required their grade-point average. In time, students were given less of a voice in campus policy and no longer served on the application committee. To Haines, the shift reflected Livingston’s steadfast turn toward the real world. “Students shouldn’t have the right to see other students’...
folders,” he says. “But in those days no one thought about letting them do it.”

Steve Zurier LC’77 and his classmates saw ample evidence of the changes underfoot at Livingston from September 1973, when they entered the college, to May 1977, when they graduated. “When I first got there, it was kind of like Woodstock Nation,” Zurier says. “People were wearing jeans and dungaree jackets and had long hair and that kind of thing. By the time 1977 rolled around, the vast majority of graduates were business and finance majors. People had cut their hair and were wearing business suits and carrying briefcases and sporting calculators. It was kind of like a portent of what was to come in the 1980 election and 30-years-plus of conservatism in this country.”

In his 1977 graduation speech, Rob Snyder acknowledged that Livingston was teetering between its past and its future. Snyder, now an associate professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers–Newark, argued that the hard work needed to sustain Livingston’s mission would be worth the trouble. “There is a need for a Livingston that provides an alternative to the average American college—and educates people previously denied access to higher education,” Snyder said. “There is a need for a college where students can be active architects and participants in their education. There is a need for a college that offers an education that is not only liberal—but liberating.”

By 1982 the university had merged the faculties of Douglass, Livingston, Rutgers, and University Colleges into the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. By 2007 the colleges themselves, each of which had become its own academic fiefdom, with varying standards, were unified into the School of Arts and Sciences—in large part to standardize admission, core curriculum, and graduation requirements. Many people associated with Livingston believe those moves eroded the school’s impact. But Dan Ogilvie, a psychology professor who came to Livingston from Harvard in 1970, sees Livingston’s influence throughout a reconfigured Rutgers.

“The philosophy of what was happening at Livingston really did ultimately loosen up the university,” he says. “People say, ‘Well, you know, Livingston really wasn’t successful.’ I don’t buy it. Livingston was very successful in having a huge impact on what was happening in the rest of the university.”

For Leroy Haines, this academic year will be his last. He’s retiring in June, 43 years after first arriving at Livingston. He’s been witness to all that Livingston has endured, and all that it’s become. He’s seen the rambunctious student protests and the sublime faculty concerts. He’s seen the succession of Livingston deans and the policy changes they wrought. He arrived on a muddy mess of a campus and watched it steadily expand, and he leaves as Livingston undergoes a physical makeover that is dramatically altering the campus. And he’ll take with him plenty of memories. “Livingston was a family,” he says. “Livingston was a community. That’s why we always survived.” •