

8-12-99

Danforth Associates

One of many nice things that happened to Paul and me during our academic years was our appointment as Danforth Associates. The Associates Program, we learned, was a project of the Danforth Foundation. The Foundation was best known among academics for the Danforth Scholars which supported prestigious advanced education scholarships. The Associates Program carried the higher education philosophy to fostering closer relations among faculty and students on college and university campuses across the United States. Associates were appointed by a national committee on the recommendations of members of the faculty at individual colleges and universities. The Associate and spouse served for three-year terms and could be reappointed. They, in turn, nominated fellow faculty members based on their observations of a member of the faculty who fostered closer relations with students, was known for outstanding teaching, and was a scholar in his or her academic specialty.

Paul and I felt honored by the appointment, attracted especially by the emphasis on entertaining small groups of students in our home; it was an idea we had tried on our own. The Danforth Associates reinforced the philosophy of better individual relations with students. There was a yearly stipend for entertainment and books, as well as annual spring meetings with other Associates from colleges and universities in the region. In addition, there was a one-time expense-paid national conference for each Associate family. Other Associate couples on our campus reinforced the efforts of encouraging closer relations between faculty families and students.

We immediately began a series of Sunday evening informal meetings with students from disciplines outside our own interests in mathematics, statistics, and English. At first the students seemed somewhat doubtful of such meetings, but the fact that the dormitory students' dining facilities did not have Sunday evening meals turned into an incentive for the first students to accept our invitations. The success of the gatherings with the on-campus students helped sell the idea of the meetings to off-campus students who were more scattered and frequently included spouses and children. We enjoyed getting to know them all, and they liked the food, the fellowship with us and our young sons, and the wide range of conversation that resulted.



Wayne Booth, undated. (University of Chicago Photographic Archive, [apf1-00818](#), Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library)

Damn your meddling ways

Our first spring regional meeting was a three-day conference at a comfortable park in the hill country of Texas, attended by Associate couples from universities all over Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. Like all the subsequent meetings, the weather was the best one could ask for in early Texas spring: cool, sunny, delightful. The guest speaker was Wayne Booth from the University of Chicago, an inspiring scholar who quickly became an enduring mentor and hero for both of us. He was charming, knowledgeable, entertaining, and endlessly provocative. There was also opportunity to explore the countryside and get acquainted with our colleagues from other universities.

That conference was the pattern followed at all spring meetings. Sometimes we met at dude ranches around Texas, and sometimes we would be at a vacation motel in a more or less central location in the state. The meeting I best remember was in the early sixties at a state park near LBJ country. The spring weather was ideal, and the rugged land provided excellent facilities for us to sit outdoors and discuss the theme of the meeting – ethnic problems of the early sixties, primarily the integration of the formerly "separate but equal" black and white schools. The invited speaker was a charming professor from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. We met, first in a large group outdoors in a shady circle seemingly created for informal discussion of some of the troubling problems of the time. The guest speaker began our morning by dividing us into several groups, among each distributing cards assigning each person to "be" African American, Mexican, Indian, or white. He presented each group with a different problem which was troubling educators at the time. We were to try to solve our group's problem by assuming the role of the population to which we had been assigned. I drew a card to be an African American, with others in my small group as Mexican Americans, American Indians, and Caucasian Americans. At the time, I was doing volunteer work in a Head Start school where most of the children were Mexican, with only a few of them black.

I was dubious about my ability to take on the identity of an African American and considered asking to be made a Mexican American, but did not, and then surprised myself with the vehemence with which I entered into my role. I was disturbed by the two- and three-year-old black children's distrust of me in the Head Start work, and felt that they were reflecting their parents' distrust. The African Americans in my university classes had learned to conceal their uneasiness and doubts somewhat better. Wouldn't a good place to break the cycle of distrust be in fully integrated schools where the two races could begin to understand our similarities and differences? I found myself advocating the study and subsequent appreciation of black history by all students, to be extended to study of the histories of all ethnic groups. My group felt that real integration of the races in physical and psychological unity could be a good place to begin eradicating the divisiveness among all the races, including the Hispanic and American Indian groups. I was more than a little surprised at my own vehemence in the cause: I'd always believed in integration but I was fascinated with being able to articulate and to feel some of the reasons for the first time.

Later I had a chance to talk to our leader, himself African American. I had been worrying whether I had the *right* to correct the speech patterns of my students, both young and more mature, wondering if uniform speech might not bring about disagreements within the ethnic groups. He was volubly indignant at such a thought and assured me that to ignore achieving a common manner of speech would be offensively negligible, that they would be far better off bilingually, thus being able to reach understanding among all groups with a single, understandable language. He helped

shape my future teaching of reaching an understanding with the students that fluency in their first-learned language could be reinforced by adding "standard" English, whatever that may be.

That conference, then, had the result of standing out as an enjoyable occasion but, more importantly, causing me to develop the way I taught all multicultural students in the future. The Danforth Associates program thus had a considerable influence on my private and professional life. Paul observed a similar effect on his teaching. When we attended the one-time national meeting with its many classes, we both made similar strides in refining and improving our approach to life and teaching.