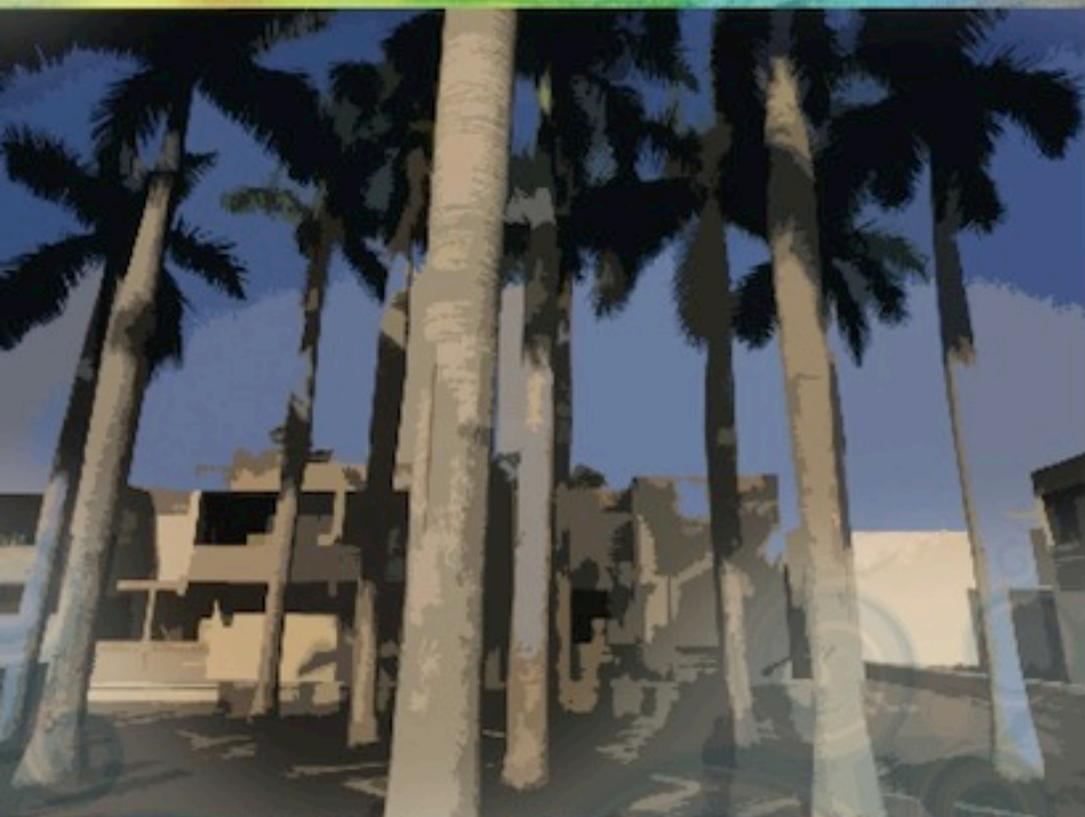
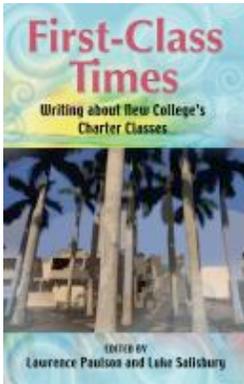


First-Class Times

Writing about New College's
Charter Classes



EDITED BY
Lawrence Paulson and Luke Salisbury



"The best education," the admissions brochure declared, "is the confrontation of two first-class minds." Attracted by that vision-and the prospect of a college education in the Florida sun with no grades or required classes-dozens of carefully selected high school seniors turned down more conventional schools, and headed for an untested educational experiment on the shores of Sarasota Bay. This is the story of New College's early years, told by those who were there.

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Front cover photograph *Pei Dorms as Seen Through Palm Court, May 1998*. New College of Florida, NCF Digital Collections, Sarasota, Fla.

Back cover photograph courtesy of New College Archives.

Photograph of Luke Salisbury by Darla DeVita

Palm Court Paradox

Luke Salisbury

Originally appeared in the New College Nimbus, Vol. 40, Summer/Fall 1998

When I think of New College, I'm overwhelmed by place—the Florida night, the softness of the air in the morning, darkness coming down over Longboat Key and the bay, the Ringling mansions with their wonderfully pretentious nouveau out-of-place bad taste, the driving midday sun, so much hotter than I remember. When you're nineteen, you don't feel death in the heat.

New College is the Palm Court. The Palm Court is the center of my memories, reveries, yearnings.

To sit in the Palm Court now is to sit perilously close to the court of Memory. Court in the sense of being judged; court in the sense of wooing. Humbert tells Lolita there's a moment when your nose hits the mirror, and in the Palm Court at a reunion, at 2 a.m., when current students are staging a party and you're dancing with someone you used to dance with, your nose hits a mirror in time—hits the hard paradox that you can be so close to something you can almost touch it, and at the same time be so far.

The students are paradoxical too. They look unimaginably young but they also don't. They look remarkably like I did the day I left in 1969. The

Bohemian, long-haired, rest-of-the-world-isn't-real, we're smart, we're-important attitude looks the same to me. But that's just my perception. I don't interview them. I'm more interested in looking because I'm looking at that mirror in time, looking at myself, looking for myself . . . just like 1969.

The royal palms, a pagan grove in the midst of all that linear 20th century architecture, are taller. In Hollywood the palms are forty-foot stalks that puncture the flatness and reach for the Hills, but appropriate as that might be, as the Palm Court has seen much posing and acting, these palms won't get high enough to puncture memory's proportions.

I sat in the Palm Court my first night at New College. I was in the second class and the college had about 170 students. I was with my roommate, who hadn't been away from home before. I'd been to prep school and was used to being away from home, which was a pretty tense place anyway, and I had that restlessness of someone who suspects he's never belonged and won't.

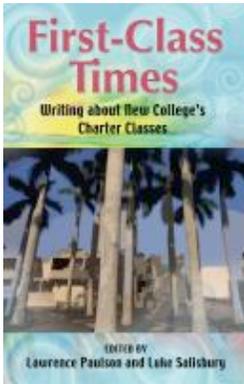
I watched people come out of those new, fabulous I. M. Pei dorms. The buildings were so intricate, so clean, so modern—just the setting for an experiment in learning, just the setting for breaking rules I wanted to break. In boarding school, I lived in what had been a mansion in Princeton, New Jersey, and used to fantasize Scott Fitzgerald shown the door for being drunk. Here each room had its own entrance and bath—no communal shower, no hallways, no guys howling with frustration on Saturday night. The rooms had locks, too. Solid-sounding things, reputedly made in Switzerland, a land

known for secrets. Prep school taught nuance, and I had a very good idea what the nuances of "experimental college" and "meeting of first-class minds" would be.

That first night, any Palm Court night, now or then, in Sarasota or memory, is/was tinged with mystery. Promise. What could be learned here? From whom? People drifted out of those catacombed blocks of lockable rooms – rooms that would soon have their own histories and nuance. Were the people as smart as advertised? Who were these women? Were they as bold as they looked? Would I write a novel here? Read Proust? Understand *Ulysses*? Become the person I said I was?

Thirty years later the Palm Court has a different nuance. Its mysteries are the mysteries of time, its paradoxes the paradoxes of memory – the ever-changing balance of then and now – its labyrinth something akin to Octavio Paz's description of the Mesoamerican pyramid as a place of creation, sanctuary, and sacrifice: "petrified time." Bob Dylan caught this in "Mr. Tambourine Man," a song that remains as supremely mysterious as when I heard it the summer before I came to New College. Dylan said of the 1950s, "I carry that time around in me." We carry the Palm Court.

When we dance at 2 a.m. with someone we used to dance with, we aren't reliving the past but paying homage to the gods of the place.



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