Austin College's New Design to Instruction

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Austin College's
New Design for Instruction

Austin College is located in north central Texas, directly north of Dallas about sixty miles, at Sherman, Texas. We have about 1,200 students and about 90 faculty. (The "abouts" are in there because I want to be very careful about the validity of my statistics, in light of Dr. Hodgkinson's remarks. But I think those will hold up!) Percentage-wise, perhaps, this data is meaningful.

We're quite regional in terms of where our students come from. About 88% come from Texas, and principally from the major metropolitan regions of the state. About 7% come from bordering states, like Oklahoma. And that leaves only 5% coming to us from around the nation and other countries. So we're presently quite regional, although that is one thing we're hoping to be able to change a bit as we move ahead.

Scholastic aptitude mean scores don't mean much but, for the record, for last year's entering class the mean scores were: Women—531 Verbal, 550 Math; Men—521 Verbal, 561 Math.

In terms of the nature of the institution, we're an undergraduate liberal arts college. We offer a pretty full spectrum of concentrations. We're divided organizationally into three operating areas, the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities, and offer some 20 to 25 areas of concentration, pretty much the conventional ones. But we also—and especially in our new program—have many ways in which students may individualize in their planning and follow through to a degree.
There is now, as opposed to an earlier time, a much greater variety available to students for designing interdisciplinary concentrations or programs that fit their needs.

The only post-undergraduate course offered is what we call the Austin Teacher Program, which is a fifth-year program. The student takes a degree in one of the disciplines during the first four years, and then focuses on the development of teaching skills during the fifth year. It's an exciting program, an innovative program, especially so since we've done away with all courses, which, for education departments, is really something. In fact, the Austin Teacher Program has been earning considerable recognition in its own right and is a positive driving force aiding the more comprehensive changeover efforts that we're making to restructure the undergraduate learning environment on our campus.

It is this restructuring that we will be emphasizing in accordance with the theme of this meeting. Our restructured program consists of the following six core courses: Individual Development, Communication Inquiry (or "CI"), Heritage of Western Man I, Heritage of Western Man II, Heritage of Western Man III, and a Policy Research program. These courses must be viewed in the context of an attempt—possibly a unique attempt—to change an entire institution. The new program is called IDEAS, and its prime implementing force is known as the Total Institutional Project. We are trying very hard to implement an important experiment, using an approach defined by three of the most important words in the English language when put together: How do we—?

How do we, as students, as faculty, and as administrators do all sorts of things together? How do we plan and implement and work together? In more effective ways? In more constructive ways? In more efficient and more consistent ways? In other words, how do we change an institution?

That's why we have a "Total Institutional Project." The implications and the interrelationships to the governing structure of the College, to the operating structure of the College, to the evaluation and reward system of the College, and to the effectiveness of our communication to all of our constituencies require serious attention about what we're trying to do—and that's very difficult. We're into all of this at once. Nearly all of the parameters of the institution are in a state of flux at this time. It is an audacious effort. The very complexity of the implications and interrelationships creates crises. We keep trying to handle them according to the Japanese meaning for crisis—i.e., a "threatening opportunity." We win a few and we lose a few, but the batting average is good, and we feel it's growing.

The style of our implementation utilizes enlightened self-interest and non-zero-sum-game-theory. Everyone needs to win, students,
faculty, and the institution—especially in what they perceive as being important to them. Thus our efforts require a patient and penetrating search for self-interest, a special self-interest that happens to coincide in direction with the common interest and the general goals. When we find that interest we nourish it. We hope for benevolence, but we work with self-interest. For example, we like the faculty to see the experiment as an attempt to extend the range of their influence and usefulness, not to compete with it. And we like the students to see it as an effort to improve the learning situation, not as a threat to an already pretty good situation, but rather as a logical next step, primarily for their benefit, and certainly needing their involvement.

We’re entering, in my judgment, the most critical phase of our effort, implementation. Consensual planning and financial support, difficult as they are to attain, are still relatively simple compared with implementation. It’s a high risk game viewed one way—and yet it’s in absolute harmony with the six priorities recommended by the Carnegie Commission (October 12th issue of the *Higher Education and National Affairs Bulletin*) for action for the future. The priorities identified there were: that there must be clarification of purpose, of the goals of an institution; that there must be preservation and enhancement of the quality of the academic offerings and programs; that there must be enhancement of the diversity of the programs that are available to meet the needs of students; that there must be advancement of social justice, enhancement of constructive change to new ways of doing things. They also site the achievement of more effective governance, and the assurance of resources and their more effective use—the accountability and efficiency thing. Quite seriously (and this is probably the reason we have received endorsement in funding of our efforts), as the Dallas Cowboy nemesis George Allen puts it, “The future is now at Austin College.” We’re moving in all these priority directions for the future right now.

How’s it going? Well, we’re hopeful to cautiously optimistic. Frankly, the optimism is based mostly upon subjective opinion, which admittedly is soft evidence. More time and harder evidence are needed to develop a report on the viability of both the process and the product of the project. Meanwhile, our efforts are highly visible, becoming more so, and we feel the pressure and the responsibility to perform.

“IDEAS at Austin College”—“IDEAS” being an acronym for Individual Development: Encounter with the Arts and Sciences—is the way we’re playing that one. And in the new revision, there are three optional degree plans that a student may utilize to work toward his bachelor’s degree: (1) the so-called Basic Program, which in many aspects can be played out much like the traditional distribution program, except that in terms of requirements it includes only the six
core courses that we enumerated; (2) what we refer to as an Exploratory Sequence, a special program which also includes the core courses, but moves to more of a negotiated learning contract arrangement that the student establishes with his advisor or "mentor"; and (3) the Austin Scholars Program which is more the "elitist" program.

An illustration of our shifting emphasis can be seen in the Exploratory Sequence. The idea there is not just the need for variety, or the need for distribution in terms of so many courses from this area and so many courses from that area. It is rather to diversify and distribute more in terms of *types* of learning. The student and mentor negotiate the terms of the experiences the student needs to have in order to reach his goals. Considerations include learning about methods of investigation that differ from those in the student's own concentration, developing sensitivity to experience within the framework of academic study, defining the student's orientation to value systems and religion, while emphasizing skills of communication and an awareness of issues in communication, and learning more in a variety of ways about the context in which he lives.

Now let me indicate some of the aspects of how we are implementing these changes. What we have operating is an institutional project which is helping us to restructure programs and effect change at Austin College. The Total Institutional Project is funded from June 1972 until November of 1975, with funds coming from both the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Subheadings? We call the project "Changing Tasks and Roles in Higher Education" or, more simply, "How Do You Change an Institution?" The broad project goals, summarized, are to enhance movement toward individualized learning and to recognize the changing nature of educational tasks, which implies changing roles for students and faculty to get away from the traditional idea that teachers teach and students learn.

To give you an idea of the scale of the effort that we're involved in, we are infusing on the order of $1\frac{1}{2} million into this effort. Planning goes back over a two-year period preceding the applications to NSF and NEH for our major funding. Our first funding came through a Ford Venture Grant and an NEH Planning Grant. And then, as we moved into the implementation period, both NSF and NEH responded favorably to our applications for major funding. (Incidentally, I believe our approach was unique in that we developed a proposal, making a case for a comprehensive approach on a total institutional basis, and presented it to both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. It may be the first time that they have acted together to underwrite this type of activity.) The NEH Supplement Grant was primarily to help us with acquisition of media and library materials. The NSF Grant
was made under the College Science Improvement Program, and is viewed by the agency as something of a pilot for a new program which carries the acronym “RULE” (Restructuring the Undergraduate Learning Environment).

During the early planning phase, we involved both students and faculty members in task forces to examine a variety of aspects of the college program, from the rationale and direction of the program philosophically, down to specific program elements of what to do for the entering freshmen, and how to involve individuals in the community. And we ran pilot programs, pieces of the new program, and gained some experience from that. The faculty responded, and were able to move in the general direction toward which we were aiming. So we acquired a very strong foundation, a real commitment in terms of where we were. And I believe that that early planning was highly significant in the favorable judgment made by the two funding agencies.

Much of the action is now focused on what we refer to as Summer Resource Laboratories. Essentially, this means groups of faculty and students working together intensively for six-week periods in the summer on very serious planning or changeover efforts. We've had two summers of this now, and we have two summers ahead of us as we continue to implement the new program and phase out of the project. About 60 faculty and 40 students have been involved each of the past two summers, but this will be phasing down as we move through the next two years. The 1972 Summer Resource Laboratory opened with a two-week workshop in which students and faculty, through the use of outside consultants, reading materials, and discussions, looked seriously at these four issues: (1) Changing tasks and roles in education; (2) The use of media resources and technology; (3) Aspects of non-traditional study—meaning anything other than the lecture method; (4) Evaluation—evaluation of many types—for individual courses, for Austin College as a whole, for the project, and so on. Following that two-week workshop, we broke into task forces in order to refine the basic elements of the General Education Program: Communication Inquiry (the first course that entering students take) and its companion course, Communication Leadership; the Individual Development course, which relates to the counseling/advising relationship between the student and a faculty member and extends over all four years; the three Heritage of Western Man courses; and the Policy Research offering. Most of our energies and time had to be invested in refinement of those courses in order to get ready for the opening of school in September of 1972, when this whole new program was to be inaugurated. About 25% of our time, however, was invested by 16 particular faculty members who were exploring changeover efforts in a variety of courses—a biology course, a philoso-
phy course, an English course, et. al.—because the nature of the project's goals touch every course and every program of the College. So in the summer of 1972, about 75% of our efforts involved the college-wide core courses, about 25% the individual changeover efforts. This past summer, 1973, that percentage reversed. We continued to refine the six core courses, but we shifted our emphasis to the others. And in the next two years the emphasis will shift even more.

As supportive services for the project, and as a continuing part of the structure of the College, we have three so-called Service Units. We established these with the project, but they will become permanent. One of these is the Educational Resources Service Unit, which covers everything relating to media, including the utilization of computer techniques, particularly interactive computing. Another special unit has been established to help all of us evaluate what we're doing, through workshops. The objectives of the workshops relate very closely to the goals of the Summer Resource Laboratory, including inquiry into changing tasks and roles in education, the use of media resources and technology, modes of non-traditional study, and evaluation. And so we are involved directly in evaluating what we're attempting to do—reorganization and individualization of content where appropriate, the development and use of modules in various ways, and above all the general insistence that faculty discover alternative methods to what they have been doing.

For instance, the way the faculty staffs the CI/CL course is distinctively innovative. It is set up so that over a three- or four-year period of time about three-fourths of our faculty rotate in assignments, in and out of that leadership role for the entering course. So the faculty leader has exposures to new ways of teaching as he plays out the goals and roles that are involved in the beginning Communication Inquiry course. That is one of the strong impacts. They have a tremendous range to work within in terms of the strategies that they may choose to use in order to meet the defined overall goals of the course. That pride of authorship, that investment in the planning phase is perhaps one of the most potent forces going in terms of the interest and the success of this new venture.

Also we should note that Freshman English, as such, has nearly been replaced. We still have Freshman English available, but perhaps only 25-30 students or so are involved.

Another distinction is the very early introduction of the students to a whole variety of media—introduction to the most effective ways of utilizing various media, from the interactive computer to a film strip or an audio tape recording, while stressing the student's responsibility in the process.

The mentor relationship, the Individual Development thing, is a
particularly important aspect of this, too. The relationship begins in Communication Inquiry. At that time a particular faculty member becomes the advisor, or mentor, for the student, and as the student progresses from Communication Inquiry, the relationship with that particular faculty member is maintained. In fact, the student-mentor relationship is established for the entire four-year period, even though the mentor may not necessarily be a faculty advisor in the student’s own discipline. We should point out that the investment of that faculty member’s time is regarded as so important that it is the only thing the faculty member is doing during the first seven weeks of the fall term. He is totally at the disposal of his twenty freshmen during that period.

The early introduction to peer teaching roles has great importance, too. The student-to-student interaction in a variety of ways lets us give serious attention to the blend, the mix, of affective and cognitive aspects of education.

Another distinctive feature that is seen in our approach is a strong attention to career planning, particularly through the Individual Development relationship of the mentor and the student. Together they examine career alternatives, measure and evaluate progress being made on a periodic basis, and sort out alternatives, giving continuing attention to personal responsibility, to values, to involvement, thinking that possibly this style of education may help people in later life to be involved, to add more personal meaning, more of a sense of personal fulfillment as life goes on. So, again, we have the early emphasis, and the importance of the emphasis, on developing skills of both a cognitive and an affective nature. In all, we place an emphasis through all the core courses on an understanding of the importance of being vitally concerned with the process of education, as well as with the content.

These are the distinctive changes we see as we look back over the last year or two, and forward to where we’re going. And we believe we can sustain some momentum in these directions even after the special funding ends.

Finally, since accountability is one of the big words in all aspects of education today, we have established a continuing relationship, for the time of the project, with nine consultants who form an advisory panel and give us an avenue to accountability. The concept was first advanced in the final stages of negotiation with the National Science Foundation. In fact, they promoted the idea. (And because they were willing to pay for it, we thought it was great!) They advanced the notion of establishing a panel that would stand, in a sense, between Austin College and the National Science Foundation, serving in a consulting role for our program, and serving as the channel of communication, if you will, back to the agency—a “friendly enemy” sort
of role, as one of the panelists referred to it. I'd like to change that to more of a "lovers' quarrel" sort of relationship, but time will tell how that works out. We've only had two meetings, a spring and a fall meeting. Our next meeting will be in April, the 29th and 30th. So far, that advisory panel has been tremendously helpful, and we anticipate that it will continue to be as we phase in the new and phase out the old at Austin.

Frank Edwards