Tarrant County Junior College's Program of General Education

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I hate to start out on a negative note, but I must say that it is entirely possible (and I'll include our programs at Tarrant County Junior College) that community colleges have probably never tried general education. General education, of course, has many interpretations and definitions, but the one I'm speaking of we haven't yet tried.

General education might be considered as that which leads a learner to a quieter sense of social integration and an awareness and a sense of his place in the matrix of society. Probably the students require more than exposure to blocks of knowledge arranged by discipline. The curriculum should probably be constructed so that interrelationships among bits of knowledge are clarified. It should not be designed primarily as a preparation for university specialization, and it probably should stand alone as a contribution to students' knowledge, since it helps them understand their world. Thus, students should receive something of value even if they never take another kind of course. I'll be honest with you—that was in the charge given to me when I went to work at Tarrant County in Basic Studies. They said, "We want you to go teach—that course as if the students may never take another course in college." This was a rather shocking charge at that time, to me.

The curriculum in general education probably should be interdisciplinary for two reasons. First, new organizations of knowledge require a capacity to draw from several existing fields, cutting across...
departmental divisions that have grown up around conventional specialties. And second, we all know that the problems of life do not always conform to the way academic disciplines have sliced up knowledge and human behavior.

Thus perhaps we should emphasize, as advocated by the Carnegie Commission in its publication, "Reform on Campus," an approach of not what all students should know, but of how all students may be helped to confront large bodies of knowledge and large issues. The emphasis should be more on a general process and less on a specific and uniform content: on cultivation of curiosity, on development of critical abilities, on wider perspectives of self and of cultures, on ways to approach knowledge. General education, therefore, should be more concerned with the learner than with the content, I think. So perhaps it should be reorganized or reshuffled in regard to traditional fields. Its goals should lead to individual growth in various aspects, and it should place emphasis on behavior and on social usefulness, as well as upon intellectual development as an outcome of learning. Since those of us in the community college often serve a wide clientele with broad short-term goals, I believe the curriculum must be both a knowing and a doing curriculum. While it certainly should not be stripped of its intellectual components, it should be flexible, practical, and oriented toward individual differences in the students rather than toward conformity to academic subject matter.

Of course as all of us probably know, general education is usually suspect. Some of the vocationalists and some of the specialists are contentious of such a curriculum. They point out that general education does not give the students competencies in any one area. One Eastern dean, I read, said that general education is a "shot gun" approach to college education. A chemistry professor somewhere charged, "Whenever a student is enrolled in General Education, I know he's not very bright."

Well, perhaps they're right—but while the chemistry professor's "bright" students developed cosmetics to make people appear more beautiful, produced wonderful artificial fabrics to make clothes more comfortable, compounded many of the wonder drugs to help fight disease—while they did these things, they also created the atomic bomb to destroy whole cities, and they dumped chemical waste in the rivers and streams and polluted the waters. And we've seen the fumes from the premium gas they've "perfected" pollute the air we breathe. In short, the bright students in chemistry or physics or any of the other disciplines have indeed developed their specialties, yet knowledge of a specialty has done little to correct the social maladies of society. The divorce rate continues to rise. The relationships between races continues to deteriorate, I feel. Many people are still hungry. Crime is on the increase. The poor are still with us, and the
unemployed. For these reasons, and many more too numerous to go into here, a curriculum in general education is justified. To put it more succinctly, where the specialists have had a considerable amount of time to create a better world—of people, not things—and they’ve not succeeded, perhaps the generalists deserve a chance.

I want now to get specifically into what I was invited to deal with, and that was the Tarrant County Junior College program of general studies—if indeed it is that, which I’m not too sure about, as I said earlier. I’ll let you help me judge.

Our program is for high risk students. Because of the open door admissions policy, many students who enter community/junior colleges are low achievers—non-traditional students who have little chance of achieving academic success in traditional colleges. In an effort to accommodate these high risk students, many community colleges have initiated special courses or programs, often referred to as developmental or guided or basic or general studies programs. Their primary objective is the same, and that is to make the open door philosophy a workable one for the educationally disadvantaged. The general ineffectiveness of many of these compensatory and remedial programs in past years has been very well documented, I think, by such authors as John Roueche in a 1968 publication you may have read called, Salvage: Redirection or Custody?, and then William Moore in a 1970 publication called, Against the Odds. Early programs, primarily preparatory in nature, organized and taught by regular academic departments, were seemingly very poorly planned, probably even more poorly implemented. Some community colleges are now attempting to change this picture. A new book by Roueche and Kirk, Catching Up: Remedial Education, describes several programs which have been found to be rather successful in increasing the persistence of non-traditional students and in improving academic performance and cultivating positive feelings toward learning.

The Basic Studies Program at Tarrant County Junior College is included as one of the programs bringing new students into the mainstream of higher education. This program, which I’ve been associated with in Fort Worth since 1967, is a block-type vertical-team approach operating within a separate division in the college, General Studies. The program is one year in length and, with the exception of physical education, the courses are taught by the Basic Studies staff. The program attempts to provide a non-threatening environment which promotes the growth and development of each individual student on the basis of his particular abilities, interests, and personal characteristics. Simultaneous assistance is given in basic academic skills, personal enrichment, and adjustment to self and society. Students enroll in Basic Studies on a block schedule basis. Course selections and course times are pre-determined for rather large groups of students.
Five sections of approximately twenty students per section are assigned to a team with six faculty members, each of whom teaches a different subject. This team of five instructors and one counselor is called a vertical team and is responsible for the experiences of approximately 100 students during their initial year in college. Two such teams now exist on the South Campus and we have one team on the Northeast Campus. Included on each team are instructors who would normally reside in the various academic departments of the college if no Division of General Studies existed. All of the personnel are staff members who were hired specifically for the program.

There are several advantages, I think, to the vertical team approach operating within the separate Division. First, there is flexibility in scheduling, which permits allocation of time to activities such as field trips, and guest speakers, group research, independent study, group dynamics work, and so forth, since we do more or less control the schedule of the student. Second, the opportunity exists for strong peer relationships to develop among students within their groups. Third, a team of instructors gets to know the students on a personal basis; instructors and counselors work together to solve special learning problems which may exist among the students. And fourth, an interdisciplinary approach to learning is possible when a team of instructors teach the same students. The five instructors and the one counselor who comprise the vertical team meet at least once a week to plan common units of study and to devise appropriate strategies for instruction. And finally, the vertical teams are viewed by us as educationally sound and mechanically feasible vehicles by which the program can be expanded without sacrificing personal contact with the students.

The Basic Studies Program consists of six major areas of study. The curriculum is designed around a humanizing model of education where the student himself, as much as possible, becomes the center of the curriculum. Topics for study during the year are based on the individual, his relationship to society, and contemporary and future societal issues. It is a full-time program. The subject areas of the program are integrated through the means of a central theme. For example, considerable time is spent in the fall semester in a unit of study called “Who Am I?”. In the science class a student studies his physical, biological self. In Fine Arts Appreciation he studies elements of art, music, philosophy, drama, religion, and film as they relate to his own values, attitudes, and beliefs. In Communications, the emphasis is on improving the writing, speaking, and reasoning skills of the student as they relate to his communications with others. In Reading Improvement, efforts are made to improve his basic reading habits, as well as his enjoyment of reading. In Anthropology he studies the origin, cultural development, and behavior of man to see the
socialization process and his relationship to others. In Psychology, the student examines his own personality development.

During the spring semester, topics include Societal Issues and Problems, and a unit with which we've had great success called Society of the Future. Another example of the type of integrative theme or unit—one actually used in connection with research in Fort Worth—we call Personality of the City.

Basic Studies is designed so that the student earns 36 semester hours of credit, all of which count toward the Associate in Arts degree. Should the student choose to transfer, most of these credits are accepted by four-year colleges and universities.

Admission to Basic Studies is flexible and, we hope, personalized. No student is forced to enter this program. One may be invited to enter if he meets all or most of our criteria. We use ACT scores as one guide for students entering this program. At our school, if we don’t use the ACT or high school transcripts, there’s really not much for us to go on. There are people working on better instruments to use in identifying students who need special kinds of help, special kinds of programs, and I’m certainly most interested in that—because I can show you some 01’s on the ACT who succeeded so well that ACT obviously did not indicate what they could do. Of course, I like to think that no student is going to be hurt by entering our program and by staying with us—I don’t care what he scored on ACT. I don’t think he could be hurt by our program.

The program at South Campus is designed for approximately 200 high risk students. The students who enroll indicate a desire to obtain the Associate in Arts degree, and possibly to transfer at some future date—at least that’s what they tell us when we talk with them. Those are their aspirations at that point. A lot of them say they want to be doctors, lawyers, whatever. So this is basically designed for students who, at least when they come to our school, say that they’re interested in transfer. Students who wish to pursue technical and vocational goals are advised to enter other available programs in the Division of General Studies, technical/occupational programs.

Upon completion of the Basic Studies Program, the student may go one of four ways (this is at the end of the one year). He may be recommended for a program which can transfer to a four-year college or university. He may be recommended for a two-year technical/occupational program leading to the Associate in Applied Science degree. He may be recommended for a vocational program, for which he will receive a certificate. Or he may be recommended for job training in industry or in the community. Evaluation of the student’s progress and abilities is made by the team with which the student works during the year. In order that this can be done most fairly, the instructors
in Basic Studies do outline basic performance objectives for each of the courses.

Instructional packages have been used in an effort to individualize instruction. Lessons containing factual information have been put on audio tape and on video tape. Video tape has also been used to teach and demonstrate discussion skills. Field trips and guest speakers have brought the student into close personal contact with our community. Various group techniques are used when feasible; small group discussion is used for most class sessions, but the large lecture group is used for two or three combined sections of students when an instructor wishes to give information prerequisite for further work, or when a guest speaker or a film is utilized at the beginning or completion of a unit.

In the Roueche and Kirk publication, Tarrant County Junior College is cited as one of the few institutions that has attempted to evaluate its developmental program each year and publish an official report of this evaluation. The Basic Studies staff members seek student evaluations of the program, and also obtain evaluations from team members, team chairmen (our equivalent of department chairmen), the Division chairman, and so forth.

At the beginning of the 1972-73 fall semester, the vertical teams set some goals for the year, and although the attainment of all of these goals was probably unrealistic, they did act in some respects as a measurement of the success of our program.

For example, one of the goals was: Attrition rate on each team not to exceed 5%. Each of the vertical teams achieved this goal during both semesters. Research has shown that traditional remedial programs often have attrition rates ranging from 20% to 50%. And attrition rates below 10% are rare. So our Basic Studies Program has been consistently successful in keeping students in school through the total environmental approach.

Another goal that the teams aimed for was that 90% of the fall semester enrollees would return for the spring semester. In actuality, between 85% and 86% did come back for the spring term.

Another aim was that approximately 90% of the students would achieve an overall grade point average of 2.0 ("C" average) or above. The vertical teams were not quite as successful with this goal as they were with some of the others—but grade point averages and semester hours earned by Basic Studies students were significantly higher than those of students with similar characteristics who elected not to enter the program.

Students can elect not to enter the program, as I mentioned previously, even though their demographic data, the ACT scores, and past academic records indicate that they perhaps would have a better chance of success in our program than in regular academic classes.
Approximately 80 such students were subject of a follow-up project to determine their success compared with students who did enter Basic Studies. Fifty-one percent of the students refusing to enter Basic Studies earned a 2.0 or above GPA in the fall semester of 1972—but the average number of semester hours earned by the total group was approximately nine or ten hours. Seventy-six percent of the Basic Studies students earned “C” or better grade point averages in the fall, with an average of sixteen semester hours earned. (Of course, there are those who claim that “All that shows is that Basic Studies is easier.”)

Over the entire academic year, 63% of the students not in Basic Studies, but eligible, earned GPA’s of 2.0 or above, while 81% of the Basic Studies population had such success. In terms of semester hours earned overall, the Basic Studies students earned an average of 33 hours, while the other group earned only around 22 semester hours.

In terms of attrition during a given semester, fewer Basic Studies students dropped out of school than did the other group, but the difference was not that significant. What is significant, I feel, is the percentage of Basic Studies enrollees who returned for the spring semester (85%). Among the students who did not enter the program, only approximately 60% returned.

Another goal that the teams set up was to receive positive course evaluations and program evaluations from students at the end of each semester. Summaries of the evaluations indicate highly positive reaction at the 89% level. Positive reaction included comments on fairness of instructors, field trips, quality of tests, interest of instructors in individual student problems, and relevance of curriculum. Some negative reaction was given to some large group lectures, certain textbooks, and certain instructor teaching styles.

Other goals were: revised syllabi from each instructor and team at the end of each semester; evidence of improved class attendance by the students; and regularly scheduled area meetings between teams (in other words, the two humanities teachers, the two English teachers, etc., on each team would get together—which they now do); documented evidence of the inclusion of various ethnic-oriented materials in the different disciplines (we wanted to actually be able to examine this to see that such materials really were included); documented research on the progress of Basic Studies students in skill areas of reading and writing, and in improvement in self-concept (for this perhaps using a measure such as the Tennessee Self-Concept Test).

Certainly one of the important measures of a program’s success, I feel, is how successful its students are after leaving the program. Roueche and Kirk found that the academic performance of students in developmental programs did drop after they entered regular college programs—often due to an abrupt transition from developmental
studies to traditional college curricula. However, they also mentioned in the program study that loss of GPA is most slight at our campus, Tarrant County Junior College. But that doesn’t mean that things are “rosy” there as far as this particular problem. About half of our students who go into regular programs do “C” work or above on those courses outside of the program. But 75% of those who go on achieve a *cumulative* GPA of “C” or better when Basic Studies course grades are added to those other course grades.

It might be easy to conclude that, since there is a decline in academic achievement upon leaving developmental studies programs, the programs are not doing the job. I’m not so sure. For one thing, negative faculty expectation could be a major factor. Developmental students may be encountering some teachers whose value systems are different from those of their Basic Studies instructors. These teachers may not yet expect such students to succeed in regular courses, and students quite often live up to these sorts of expectations. Also, the student may be returning to a different mode of instruction from what he had in the developmental program. In fact, perhaps the developmental student is put back into the kind of environment that created or contributed to his educational deprivation in the first place. It is also possible that the developmental student has not, upon leaving the program, developed enough confidence or the necessary mechanical skills needed for success in traditional programs. And this may not be just reading and writing—it could be the ability to figure out what the teacher wants. It’s a problem that must be dealt with. Perhaps what is needed is an entire college community built around the assumptions that have produced successful developmental studies programs.

I’d like to end by briefly going over some components of successful developmental programs as identified in Roueche and Kirk’s book—some of which I agree with, others which I might question. But this is what those authors came up with, through their research, as tentative components of success.

(1) First of all, only instructors who *volunteer* to teach non-traditional students should be involved in developmental programs. I agree that that’s the way it *should* be—but in reality, I know that that can’t always happen.

(2) Also, use of new inexperienced teachers should be avoided. I’ve seen at our school cases in which the newest teachers would be assigned the “dummies.” (“You handle them this semester, and we’ll get you out of there next semester.”) But of course the teachers are the heart of the whole matter with these programs. It takes ones who have developed special teaching skills and a very humanistic philosophy to be successful.

(3) Another key to success is non-traditional instruction. The cur-
Curriculum must be designed around the interests of the students if programs are to overcome the negative feelings and attitudes that many high risk students bring with them to the community college.

4 Grading policies and practices should be non-punitive—yet at Tarrant County we have as punitive a system as I've ever seen anywhere.

5 Instruction should accommodate individual differences—obviously. But how to do this is a good question.

6 Self-concept development is another component of the successful program. It's likely that efforts at positive self-concept development are closely related to instructional effectiveness. Recalling Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" brings us back to consider the special needs of these students. For instance, we start hassling them about "why aren't you doing well in this course?"—while at home they're perhaps trying to just survive from day to day. One student told me the other day, "If my stepfather finds me, he'll kill me."

7 Good program image is an idea that includes everything from giving full college credit for the courses, and seeing that they apply toward graduation and program certification, to developing effective recruiting and counseling strategies.

8 The counseling function in developmental programs must be of real value to the student. The Roueche and Kirk study detected student unawareness of and/or dissatisfaction with counseling in general. Counselors have a crucial role to play in such situations, and it may not be in what we think of as their traditional activities. They can function in many ways other than by sitting in their offices with office hours, inviting students to come by. I certainly have seen the difference it's made on our teams when a counselor was part of that team. There was some talk on our campus about putting our counselors over with the regular counselors—but the other team members put up a real squawk. They didn't want the counselors on their teams taken away. And that had a real impact on the "higher-ups" at our school.

9 Probably all of you would agree that institutional commitment is a must. Often schools receive a government grant or whatever—but the real test comes when that money runs out. Does the program fold, or is the institution willing to make the commitment to maintain it?

10 The idea of separate programs is a very controversial issue. But, if possible, a separately organized division of developmental studies should be created with its own staff and administrative head. Now that's the way it should be. But if a
school has a need for this kind of program, but it's felt that, "With our low faculty we can't pull people off and put them in a separate department," I tell them, well, okay. Don't do that. But don't let that be the excuse for holding back on developing *something* for this type of student.

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