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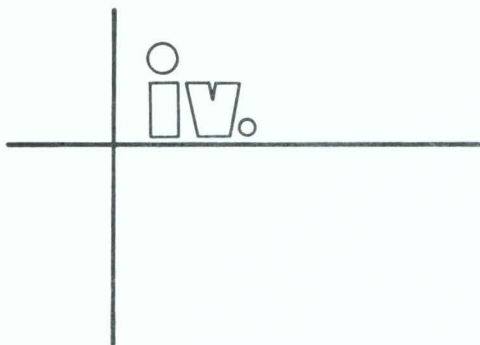


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# Capstone 75: Interdisciplinary Turmoil And Triumph At The College Of Basic Studies, Boston University

by  
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“General education has failed, not because of its curricular inadequacy (though it *is* inadequate), but because men of general intelligence are not available to teach it. It has ended up therefore in the hands of specialists who always betray it in practice . . . [The] men we must have, regardless of their pedigrees — prophets, poets, apocalyptics, scientists, scholars, intellectuals, men who sprawl across departmental boundaries, who will not toe the line, individuals as large as life, irrepressible, troublesome, and — exemplary.” (William Arrowsmith in *The Liberal Arts and Teacher Education*, 1966).

Truisms concerning the desirability of integrated programs of general education are too well-known to bear repeating. Similarly, discussions of the obvious difficulties of achieving integration in programs organized under the traditional rubrics of Science, Humanities, Social Science are equally well-known (Swora and Morrison, 1974).

We here report on an integrative interdisciplinary effort at the College of Basic Studies of Boston University. We are persuaded that the kind of project examined here is well within the grasp of all general liberal programs, whereas a total program of interdisciplinary studies probably is not achievable, for a host of professional and departmental reasons.

The sophomore curriculum in the College of Basic Studies two-year transfer program consists of a three course team-taught core, with a single elective option each semester. During the second semester of 1974-75, the three core courses, Social Science, Humanities, and Science, joined in a culminating interdisciplinary project as co-equal partners. A full seven weeks, excluding the normal reading and final examination period, were made available for the Capstone 75 Project by ending the formal elements of the core courses, including written finals, by mid-March.

The College did not come unprepared to a capstone project of this length and scope. For the past 22 years a sophomore project of major significance has been a part of the second semester curriculum. From 1952 through 1955, sophomores engaged in a city-planning exercise conducted largely by the Humanities Department. In 1956 this fairly straightforward exercise developed into a Utopia Project, complete with preliminary and preparatory readings built into the Humanities curriculum (Fisher and Richter, 1957; Richter, 1959a, 1959b). All divisions of the College supported the Humanities-centered Utopia Project, but they did not totally engage their class time and other resources. From 1959 to 1972, the divisions of Rhetoric and of Psychology and Guidance provided considerable active support and participation, but these divisions ended all formal activity when they shifted their efforts exclusively to the freshman curriculum. Science and Social Science increased their participation in the two following years, but were never co-equal in planning, implementing, or evaluating the Utopia Project.

During the 1974-75 year, circumstances at the College made it necessary to choose one of several options: forego the Utopia Project as an all-College exercise and leave it exclusively to the Humanities Division; abandon the project entirely; mandate all divisions to participate fully; or develop a new project. The political realities seemed to indicate that the fourth choice was the most viable. A representative committee was formed. After the usual amount of heated discussion, a compromise was achieved. The committee retained a number of the structural and pedagogical features of the Utopia Project and superimposed a new broad topic and a new set of criteria. The results of these efforts follow.

One of the several goals of *Capstone 75: The American City, 1975-2000* was the integration of the previous three semesters' skills, information, and values. Since the team system of teaching at the College of Basic Studies has functioned effectively for more than twenty years, and since the new project had the earlier experience of the Utopia Projects to draw on, the faculty had confidence in their ability to work effectively in the presentation of a joint program. From the Utopia Project, the committee advised continuation of a group effort: the 342 sophomore students either selected or were assigned to groups of five to seven. The committee also decided that the final group report of a minimum of fifty pages per group would be evaluated by each member of the team, and that each group would then defend its report in an oral examination. Experience with the Utopia groups had indicated that members of the faculty teams should make themselves available to counsel the groups in a range of combinations of faculty-student contacts (e.g., one faculty member and one group; three faculty members and one group). Thus the sophomores had available to them as much or more direct student-teacher contact as they would have had in the ordinary class schedule of lectures and discussion sessions.

Additionally, because the Capstone Project was a radical departure in topic and concreteness from the freer and perhaps more speculative Utopia Project, the Capstone Committee provided a series of special lectures and films during the first three weeks of the scheduled seven-week period. The purpose of these presentations was to provide the students with ideas and materials otherwise not considered in depth in the preceding three semesters. All sophomores were required to attend a total of five lectures and two major films. John Collins, a former Mayor of Boston, and Daniel Finn, former administrator of the Boston Housing Authority and a current Vice-President of Boston University, served as keynote speakers in successive weeks. These urban experts were followed by a prominent architect, the Director of Research for the New England Aquarium, and a special panel of doctors and lawyers from the Schools of Law and of Medicine at Boston University. The project was enhanced by the local availability of such expertise. These representatives from government and academe provided an enthusiastic and informed perspective for interested students initiated in the magnitude of urban problems. A number of speakers expressed a genuine interest in returning next year.

In addition to these required general presentations, individual teams arranged for 23 different seminars, lectures, and films. This past year there were three teams, each with about 100 sophomore students; two teams, each with fewer students, usually joined in offering the special activities. These events were required of all students of the sponsoring team, and open to all other sophomores and faculty. Other kinds of learning experiences were provided by individual teams: one team moved all of its groups to the University's Conference Center for a day, in order to attempt to get both physical and psychic distance from the "city" for a period of evaluation and reconsideration; a second team, operating quite differently, arranged a number of tours to departments and offices of various branches of city government and of organizations concerned with special aspects of urban living.

Further information and guidance came from the readings assigned by the Capstone Committee, supplemented by additional readings required by individual teams. These readings often came from the extensive bibliography made available to every student. Finally, each student began this intensive seven-week experience with a Committee-prepared syllabus including 1) a complete schedule of events (both required and optional); 2) an introductory statement explaining the purpose of the project and the level of expectations of the faculty; 3) a study guide of rather detailed questions and sub-questions to be considered by each student; 4) procedural guidelines; 5) 1975 census and demographic statistics for the project city. These data were Boston's statistics, but they were not so identified in order that the students might be somewhat freer in their thinking about the future.

The seven weeks of varied activities culminated in written reports from each group. Each paper had to include the group's evaluation of the *existing* major problems of the city, a description of the city as it *ought* to be in twenty-five years, and a detailed examination of the processes by which the *ought* could be achieved. The paper itself, according to Committee and faculty expectations, should show continuity of thought and expression; each group received a grade for the complete paper. During the two-hour oral examination, each student was responsible for the defence of each

aspect of the paper, regardless of the particular part of the paper he or she may have contributed. Students received individual grades for the oral examination. Total grade weight for the project came to 30% of the semester grade in each of the three core courses.

With the exception of a few minor variations from team to team, usually concerned with enhancing early *group* activity or with reducing the expected tensions arising from the conflict of differing personalities within groups, the seven-week period passed very much as outlined above. The expected scheduling conflicts, equipment malfunctions, and delays in book delivery caused some confusion, but for the first time through an extensive revision of a project viewed with sentimental and pedagogical respect by many faculty members, the Committee and the College have some justification in feeling pleased with the manner in which the project developed.

But how well did Capstone 75 really work in achieving those lofty goals set for it? After the completion of the project students were asked to respond to a brief questionnaire. In the first part, participants indicated whether or not each speaker, film, or text should be used in the project again next year. Of the total sophomore student population of 342, 145 responded to the questionnaire. Fourteen of the fifteen speakers received more than 50% favorable responses with nine receiving more than 66% favorable responses. All eleven films and all six books received more than 50% favorable responses. Six of the eleven films and five of the six books received more than 66% favorable responses. We interpret this as indicating a high level of satisfaction with the overall project as well as the individual inputs.

A free response section of the questionnaire produced quite a variety of responses: "A true learning experience that opens our eyes and makes us feel a great concern for the welfare of society. It was fun, really worthwhile." "Forget it!" "It didn't teach us or we didn't learn anything that we didn't already know." "Although I did not do the Utopia Project, I found this one a challenge and very informative." "A project such as this could be fantastic if we had more time to do the proper research." "The oral stinks!" "Overall a nerve-racking experience and I hated it when I did it but in retrospect I enjoyed it, learned much, and wouldn't have missed it."

The faculty were asked to critique the project. Most faculty responses dealt with matters of administration and of preparation for the next project. For example, several faculty members urged more specific preparation during the first Sophomore semester. Faculty enthusiasm seemed to us to rise as the project went on, perhaps peaking just *before* the papers were finally handed in. Thereafter, the problems of evaluating seven weeks of work and preparing for the oral examinations, especially when it seemed likely that faculty expectations had not been fully realized in the papers submitted, caused some faculty responses to be gloomier than most of the student responses. Interestingly enough, however, no faculty team or individual faculty member suggested abandoning the project; all suggestions and comments were aimed at improving upon this year's Capstone project.

We believe that Capstone '75 contains the following significant and successful elements:

A. *Student Group Effort* — For most sophomores, this project presents

the first opportunity to function in a joint project, motivated by a group grade, working toward a group goal. The necessity for compromises arising from the broad spectrum of opinion within each group, and the discovery of differing personalities contributes to what a majority of the students believe to have been a significant educational experience.

- B. *Inputs* — The all-sophomore class and team lectures, seminars, and films provide a wide variety of inputs which constitute perhaps the chief advance in the structure of the project over the earlier Utopia Project. Some faculty expressed the hope that the students found these presentations as stimulating, interesting, and educational as they did! For the most part the presentations were of excellent quality. One of the secondary advantages of this all-sophomore project at a time of limited budgetary resources was that the large numbers of students involved justified the expense of attracting recognized authorities in a field.
- C. *The Written Paper* — The requirement that the final group paper have significant elements of internal consistency and inter-relationships means that students must keep in close touch with each other during the researching of the various topics. Although there is considerable unevenness from group to group, without this requirement of consistency, the final paper would be merely a series of individual papers related only in that they would be submitted together.
- D. *The Oral Examination* — The final group activity of the students occurs as they face their faculty in a 'defence' of their work. During this one to two-hour meeting, faculty and students learn from both the questioning and answering. Several faculty were not fully satisfied with this aspect of the project and have suggested different approaches for next year. One suggestion, for example, was that the students should face their faculty before they present the final paper to the team and thus improve the quality of the final paper. We anticipate several different approaches to the oral exam next year.
- E. *The Faculty Team* — Team teaching is one of the strongest aspects of the educational process at the College of Basic Studies and is at its strongest in collaborative and integrative projects. As the primary source of curriculum integration it certainly remains a critically important feature of the Capstone Project.

Identifying these five aspects of the project as strengths is not intended to suggest that other programs would necessarily need to imitate the theme, the organization, or the program of Capstone '75. We hope that readers of this article have silently selected and adapted elements of their own programs which might well lead to the development elsewhere of a somewhat comparable project. To the extent that those silent plannings become visible in actual programs in other schools and colleges, Capstone '75 will have achieved an important latent function.

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