1977

The Exploratory Year: A New Approach to the Four-Year Experience at Whittier College

Michael J. McBride
Whittier College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol9/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by
the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at
WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives
by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For
more information, please contact
maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
THE EXPLORATORY YEAR:
A New Approach to the
Four-Year Experience
at Whittier College

Michael J. McBride

Most students begin college with little idea about the field of study they will eventually pursue. Some have made a decision in this area, but often have only a vague notion of what is implied in such a decision. Yet, in both cases, the general pattern of liberal arts colleges is to put such students into a general studies program for two years consisting of required or strongly recommended courses. While students may gain a broad educational background, those with little idea about their future area of concentration must base a decision regarding the "major" on a brief introduction through one or two courses, while those who had a specific interest are often forced to delay entrance into that field. In either case students are often into their third year before they can confidently determine whether or not they have found an area of study consistent with their personal development and future goals. Subsequent realization that the chosen field is not the appropriate one may be irrelevant because students do not have the time, money, or incentive to switch to a more meaningful area of concentration. The current employment difficulties facing college graduates further compounds this problem.

In part to deal with the above concerns, but also as part of a much more far-reaching philosophical consideration of its educational program, Whittier College reevaluated its curriculum and substantially changed the traditional four-year format. One of the major aspects of Whittier's new curriculum is the concept of the "exploratory year." This paper is an exploration of the nature
Curricular reform at Whittier began during the academic year 1969-70 as an examination of the academic calendar. It became evident that any changes, if they were to be responsive to student needs and new trends in higher education, would have to be more sweeping than simply changing the calendar. A task force consisting of professors from the departments of Psychology, Philosophy and Religion, Music, History, and Chemistry was established during the summer of 1970. After considerable discussion and exploration with all segments of the Whittier College community, the task force presented a "New Curriculum Model for Undergraduate Students" (Whittier College, 1970) at the beginning of the 1970-71 academic year.

During that year an executive committee consisting of three faculty members, ultimately responsible to the Faculty's Educational Policies Committee, was established by President Frederick M. Binder. This executive committee, after extensive consultation with Whittier faculty members, administrators, students, and educational officials external to the college, recommended implementation of the new curriculum beginning with the 1971-72 academic year.

Among some of the basic assumptions underlying the new curriculum are the following:

1) students cannot learn all there is to know;
2) faculty, especially with the knowledge explosion of the twentieth century, cannot determine which "package" of knowledge is essential to the educated person;
3) students face an increasingly complex world in which they will need to make important decisions about themselves and their future goals.

In light of these assumptions the curriculum emphasizes the development of the whole person, especially the ability to make responsible decisions about one's self. The educational process is considered to go far beyond the traditional classroom activities and advisement; co-curricular aspects of the student's program, and service to college and community (the latter consistent with Whittier's Quaker heritage) are seen as legitimate and essential segments of the educational experience. In terms of the academic program the student is encouraged to develop at least tolerance for other viewpoints, self-responsibility regarding his educational program, and the ability to learn how to learn so that he can function positively after graduation. These goals are promoted through such aspects of the new curriculum as "ways of knowing," the Educational Design, and the aforementioned restructuring of the four-year experience.

Ways of knowing is a phrase borrowed from Phillip Phenix's book, Realms of Meaning (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964). It implies that there are different ways of understanding what is truth or, more simply put, different ways of learning. The assumption made by Whittier College is that content of courses and disciplines should not be the sole focus of an education. Given the tremendous increase in things to be known, it seems more important to develop in students the ability to learn how to learn so that they can continue to develop after graduation. How various disciplines develop their knowledge, then, is given equal status with the subject matter of disciplines.

In addition, since different disciplines have different ways of knowing, students are encouraged to study several ways of knowing in depth to increase their awareness of other points of view. In other words, since the chemist
understands his world in a way different from that of the philosopher, it would be a liberating experience for a chemistry student to study as a philosopher does, thus breaking him out of possible disciplinary encapsulation. Such course work is termed an area of contrast.

Phenix identified six ways of knowing — aesthetics, ethics, empirics, synnoetics, synoptics and symbolics. Although these particular terms are undergoing reevaluation at Whittier, they are the ways of knowing currently in formal use. While it may be argued that students taking a normal background of general studies courses will come into contact with different ways of knowing, it is the shift in emphasis to this concept and the subsequent development of sensitivity to other points of view (other ways of thinking) which are the main attributes of this approach.

When a student has determined his major area of interest, he develops, in close consultation with his academic advisor, an educational program consistent with his current interests and future goals. This program (the Educational Design) while subject to revision as the student develops, outlines the student’s goals, his field of concentration, area of contrast, and elective courses. Although many students will follow the traditional major, the field of concentration facilitates interdisciplinary studies and allows the student to be creative if consistent with his overall goals. Whatever the final shape of the Design, the student is encouraged to view his four-year college experience as a coherent whole and has participated in making decisions about himself.

The Educational Design embodies the restructuring of the four-year experience. After the initial year, students who have decided upon a field of concentration study in that area during their second and third years. While they may take more courses in this area during their fourth year, it is expected that by that time they will have become competent scholars in their discipline and, to a certain extent, encapsulated in the way of knowing of that discipline. During their fourth year, students take at least one senior colloquium and several courses in an area of contrast.

The senior colloquia bring together students from all disciplines with a particular topic, for example “The City of the Future.” Students in one field thus see how students from other areas think and the different concerns they may have regarding the same issue. The contrast to concentration asks students to study another field in depth. Thus the chemist may learn how the philosopher, artist, or political scientist come to understand the world. Taken together, the senior colloquium and areas of contrast act to integrate the student’s knowledge by putting into perspective the different ways of thinking while simultaneously liberating him from the encapsulation that occurred within his own discipline. Additionally he should develop a tolerance and willingness to question, consistent with the liberal arts perspective.

The four year experience is indeed reversed. Rather than going through a broadening experience during the first two years with subsequent specialization and possible encapsulation by the time of graduation, students move into their chosen field of concentration when they have made a choice and, we hope, go through a liberating experience during their last year. For this process to be effective, however, it is essential that the student be able to make a responsible decision regarding his future goals. It is here that the importance of the first or exploratory year becomes apparent.

There are three key aspects to the exploratory year approach — the initial module, the mentoring system, and self-evaluation. For the student to be able to explore effectively, and thus make a responsible choice regarding his future
course of study, he must have a chance to experience the nature of the various disciplines he might be interested in. To facilitate this, each department offers a course termed an initial module. In such a course the student is to be exposed to the discipline — its subject matter, ways of knowing, and the life style of its practitioners. Thus it goes beyond the traditional introductory course and is different from content-oriented general studies courses. Students should be able to determine not only whether or not they like the subject matter, but also whether or not they would be interested in a vocation related to that subject matter. Classes are limited in enrollment to assure close student contact with the faculty member who serves as one model of the discipline.

Students are encouraged to take a number of such courses until, and often even after, they come to a decision about their future goals. Regular courses may be taken concurrently and students are free to end exploration whenever they are confident of their area of concentration. On the other hand, students having second thoughts regarding their original choice are free to return to the exploratory approach. (Since Whittier has adopted a seven-session calendar (three five week sessions in the fall and three in the spring when the normal load is two classes per session and a four week session in January with a one course load) students can take up to twelve exploratory courses in one year (none in January) and can switch to their area of concentration at the beginning of any session. Thus there is more flexibility than in the semester or quarter systems.)

However, to expect students just out of high school to make such important decisions responsibly without assistance is too idealistic. Thus the exploratory year operates in conjunction with a system of mentors. Mentors are special advisors who, although members of specific disciplines, are responsible for encouraging students to explore in appropriate areas, based on a student's high school record, stated interests and goals, and most importantly, personal interaction. In other words, mentors are not to function as recruitment officers for their respective departments and thus do not function as the traditional academic advisor. Rather they are to serve as a friend and guide to the student as the student endeavors to find out who he is and where he is going. Once a student has selected an area of concentration he will work with a regular academic advisor, but retain his mentor for any areas of concern he might have in the future.

Finally, near the end of the exploratory year, each student is to write an evaluation of his first year experience. Thus he will have to consider his present condition, future goals and to what extent he is progressing toward them. Moreover, his evaluation will provide valuable data on the exploratory year itself, enabling the college to modify the program in ways consistent with students' needs as part of a continuing reevaluation of the exploratory process.

What are the advantages of such a system? First, the student develops an awareness of himself and his future goals early enough so that he might develop an educational program consistent with those factors. When combined with the Educational Design, the student should have an understanding of his particular educational experience and see it as a coherent whole rather than as a collection of courses taken because someone said they should be taken. This combined with the senior colloquia and area of contrast in the senior year should help to develop an individual with the breadth of a liberal arts education, an awareness of other viewpoints, and the ability to act responsibly in the environment he enters after college. While these goals certainly are not new, it appears that that new curriculum at Whittier, begin-
ning with the exploratory year, may provide a more effective way of achieving them.

**Evaluation.** Four years after its inception faculty and student reaction to Whittier College's new curriculum is quite favorable. The exploratory year is seen as one of the more positive aspects of this program. Student evaluations indicate satisfaction with the variety of initial modules offered and the opportunities both to explore and to move immediately into their major areas of interest once exploration has taken place. On the average, students take five initial modules during their exploratory experience.

The exploratory year is not without its problems, however. Faculty are not in total agreement about what should constitute the exploratory course. Thus student experience may vary considerably from one department to another. More importantly, though, the exploratory year, preparation of the Educational Design and Whittier's new curriculum in general require a strong commitment on the part of the faculty to advisement. While idealistically such a commitment should be the norm, it does place a heavy time demand on faculty members who have other responsibilities as well. This problem is compounded by the natural inclination of some students to avoid their mentors or advisors and delay development of their Educational Design. More effective freshman orientation programs and a Director of Advisement have improved this situation, however, and such problems are less critical now than during the curriculum's early stages.

In summary, most faculty and students are well-satisfied with the New Curriculum at Whittier College. Students play a greater role in the development of their educational program aided by the exploratory year concept and the advisement process. While operating in the liberal arts framework they are able to plan ahead in terms of both academic and vocational interests, thus deriving greater relevance from the liberal arts approach.