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TAPPING THE POTENTIALS
OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
IN A FRESHMAN CORE PROGRAM

William A. Sadler, Jr.

Preface

This article will discuss an innovative Interdisciplinary Freshman Core Program that has been developing for five years at a small liberal arts college in the New York metropolitan area. The significance of this program extends beyond the campus of Bloomfield College, for it exemplifies one way to meet productively some of the serious issues now confronting higher education across the country. Before examining this program, let me introduce you to this College in terms of its precarious position at the start of its second hundred years of existence.

The Setting

In what now looks like understatement, Fred Hechinger commented in writing about educational crises in the seventies that little Bloomfield College was exhibiting many of the big problems facing higher education in this decade. In 1973, plans for an expanded campus had to be abandoned as our student population dropped by over 50%. Our Board of Trustees moved decisively to manage retrenchment by eliminating tenure throughout the College and retaining only those faculty deemed necessary by a Faculty Council’s analysis of requisite positions. The AAUP then sued the College on the grounds that financial exigency was insufficient to warrant dismissing tenured faculty. Although the AAUP won its suit, the College did go bankrupt and operated under Chapter Eleven for two years. An anxious, demoralized, and polarized faculty found that not only did it have many fewer students, but that the quality had declined proportionate to the
quantity. Mean scores of daytime students’ ability dropped from above the 40th percentile (i.e., in terms of standardized test scores, nearly 60% of college students nationwide scored higher than our average student in 1972) to the 20 percentile. Faculty faced heterogenous classes with large proportions of what we have come to call nontraditional students. Mean reading and writing scores were at the ninth grade level. Combined mean SAT scores were below 800. Most students were poorly prepared by high schools for college. More than half our freshmen came from minority groups and from ghetto schools. An increasing number of students have had ESL problems, coming from strong ethnic backgrounds and/or foreign countries. And a growing number of our students have been adults who have been away from formal education for many years.

These new students primarily came to college for job preparation. Most have chosen to major in business, accounting, or nursing. Pressure to drop general requirements led to the College’s adopting a common distributional choice of liberal arts courses, which in fact permits more concentration in career courses. Thus the liberal arts tradition has been declining. For example, a strong religion department in this Presbyterian college that only fifteen years before had a seminary has been reduced to one professor who works half time in the library. Also part of the decline are philosophy, foreign languages, physics, and a host of other upper division courses in traditional majors.

Many faculty have been unhappy about their losses, resentful of the new type of students, apprehensive of the future and their jobs, and frustrated by administrative pressure to teach well all students whom the College has managed to recruit. The plight of this College for some time resembled that of “Our Gal Sunday”: can a little college so unprepared for big crises survive in the press of issues in the world of the seventies? The answer now seems to be: yes. In many respects the College, now two years out of Chapter Eleven, is stronger than it was five years ago. In part the present strength of the College is due to the way our interdisciplinary program has met the challenges of these turbulent times.

Issues and Objectives

While the story of Bloomfield College is not typical, there are features of it that suggest we have indeed been confronting issues commonly found in higher education. These issues include an unresolved conflict between a liberal arts tradition and careerism, a clash of expectations between traditional faculty and nontraditional students, enormous pressures placed upon teaching because of complex, chronic economic problems, the fragmentation of general education and an increasing competitiveness throughout academia, and a demoralized condition of faculty and students who manifest a sense of having lost touch with a meaningful community and those closely related symptoms of lack of dedication, purpose, and conviction.

Our Interdisciplinary Freshman Core Program can be seen as part of this College’s attempt to respond creatively to many of these issues. In so far as many of us face common issues underlying our own specific local problems, then what we have learned from our special program can have general interest. We have learned much from our experience; in part this was due to an unanticipated windfall from Washington. In the midst of our crisis the College was fortunate to obtain a large federal HEW grant that totally subsidized this new venture in a Freshman program for four years. It has allowed us not merely to survive but to experiment, reflect, reformulate, adapt, and grow. The grant greatly lessened the heavy economic pressures, so that we could concentrate upon substantive educational issues. We have thus been privileged to have an unusual learning experience, which we are now ready to share with others facing similar problems.

The focus of our Core program has been directed towards the marked change in our
student population, primarily in terms of academic preparation and interests. In spite of grave academic deficiencies, most of our students have serious intentions of completing college and moving into "white collar" careers. One question underlying our Core Program is: how can we help these students and provide them with a college education at entry point without lowering academic standards or diluting the quality of higher education? Our answer is this program carefully adapted to students’ needs, limitations, and aspirations. Equally important to us, and relevant to the mission of the College, is that this Program combines values of a liberal arts tradition with objectives of career education. Depending on how the latter are interpreted, we do not believe that the two are necessarily incompatible.

In designing this Core Program our aim was to create an integrated, encompassing learning environment, which provides frequent, consistent reinforcement for learning, self-discipline, and personal development. We have done this by constructing a set of four Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) courses that are required of all day students and which are supplemented by other courses, seminars, workshops, tutorials and advising. These four courses that constitute the central part of the Core bear the title: Analysis and Communication. The emphasis in all IDS courses is upon skill development. Students are not tested for memorizing content but for their ability to reason and to communicate. In all Core courses we aim to help students become actively and responsibly involved in their own learning. A measurable objective in these IDS courses has been to bring a majority of our Freshmen up to college level performance in ability to analyze and communicate as well as in basic skills by the end of the first year. At the same time our objective is to provide them with a foundation of knowledge and understanding for upper division courses and to foster in them a serious interest in college level learning.

The Evolving Structure of the Core

One set of courses (IDS 101-102) concentrates upon literature and social sciences in a two semester sequence. These courses continually evolve; the curriculum has never been the same. Teachers representing various disciplines, including literature, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology have worked closely together in this part of the Core. Different disciplinary perspectives contribute to the richness of the courses; however, interdisciplinary differences are now much more apparent in our weekly training and planning sessions where teachers discuss the assigned material among themselves before doing so with students. Unlike other interdisciplinary programs where students are confronted with differences between disciplinary viewpoints, we have learned that it is less confusing and more constructive to emphasize what disciplines have in common, such as a concern: to read material carefully; to reach an understanding of it by following elements in the material to form an appropriate and coherent viewpoint; and to express one’s understanding of the material in clear, coherent statements that are supported by evidence. Whether reading a story by Baldwin or Kafka, a play by Ibsen or Albee, or a study by Freud, Erikson, or William Whyte, the objectives are the same. Effective performance in all these disciplines involves careful observation, competent analytical thinking, individual synthesis, and communication that elicits and learns from feedback.

Another two semester sequence (IDS 103-104) concentrates upon math and natural science. Again the teachers represent a variety of disciplines. Their emphasis in class is also upon essential elements in scientific discovery, thinking, and reporting. The method of teaching stresses learning by experimentation. Analysis and Communication set the framework; the objectives include learning by carefully examining evidence, discovering basic structures and ingredients and how they work, testing formulations, and arriving at
an analytical understanding based upon one's own work. In all IDS courses, there is consistent emphasis upon careful observation, drawing conclusions based upon evidence, seeing connections, resolving problems, and communicating one's understanding clearly and effectively.

Recently we have tried another innovation with a group of thirty-five students who have been totally involved in a more concentrated interdisciplinary track that has been built around Bronowski's text, THE ASCENT OF MAN. While there have been serious problems with the text (not so much because of difficulty as because of the author's biased and sometimes superficial treatment, which run counter to course objectives), the basic results of the experiment have encouraged us to start planning an even tighter integration of all four courses. In this experiment, professors of chemistry, literature, and history have worked closely as a team with the students, emphasizing skill development along with understanding scientific and historical progression. It has proven to be extremely useful to have professors of humanities reinforce objectives in science labs and vice versa. Again, our interdisciplinary thrust emphasizes commonality and complementarity rather than differences.

Learning to focus upon students' development in both advanced and basic skills simultaneously has led us to discard some conventional pedagogical methods and to concentrate upon others. For example, even though we have a number of highly articulate, exciting lecturers, we have virtually eliminated the lecture method. It has proven to be the least effective way to achieve our educational goals. Instead our teaching is done in small classes using either the laboratory experiment approach or small group discussions. Short talks are given when necessary and useful in small classes. Tutorials and individual conferences are also frequently used. We have experimented with a variety of simulation games and media techniques, and we have drawn from the rich pool of professional talent in the New York area for special projects; but we have learned that our sometimes dazzling innovations have too easily diverted attention rather than reinforce our objective of active, involved student participation. Putting the student rather than the professor into the limelight has been one of our most difficult adjustments. To new faculty members in the Core our present parsimony in methods at first appears drab. But we have emphasized a rich diversity of approaches and viewpoints in the past only to find that these satisfied teachers much more than they helped students. Nevertheless we regularly experiment with curricula and methods in order to improve our Core learning experience.

Tightly integrated into our interdisciplinary Core courses is a vigorous Learning Support Workshop, which has been designated a model program by Washington. Students are given diagnostic tests upon admission to the College by the Workshop personnel. These tests determine where students will be placed in the Core as well as providing an information basis for measuring growth. We now have a developmental reading and writing course (IDS 100) for students whose skill levels are not yet sufficient for them to be admitted into IDS 101; about 15% of our students are expected to be placed here in the future. Math scores determine placement in particular tracks within IDS 103-104. Scores in reading and writing determine whether students may elect one or two other courses in addition to Core courses. All students are required to participate in weekly workshops until they test out of them. The workshop sequence is part of the Core courses. The workshop personnel are active in planning and evaluating Core courses. They regularly advise classroom teachers about appropriate materials and approaches, and discuss with them skill problems of individual students. It is in the workshops that students are given concentrated assistance in mastering basic skills in math, reading, and writing to support their learning in IDS courses. Both workshops and classes utilize a developmental approach. Synchronizing the pace of these two aspects of the Core has
been a slow, difficult process; but we have learned that it is possible to integrate remedial work with significant classroom learning, provided there is frequent communication and cooperation between all involved personnel. The integration of workshops with IDS courses is a distinctive element of our Core Program.

Developments Within the Core

I have been attempting to describe how the IDS Core focuses upon student development. The central part of the Core concentrates upon development of analytical and communication skills; the Learning Support Workshop upon basic skills. In addition there is a set of optional Life Planning Seminars, which are aimed at developing a student’s self-confidence, self-awareness, sense of responsibility for one’s own learning, and interpersonal communication skills.

When the Core began we placed more emphasis upon thinking in the courses and upon self-awareness in these seminars. We have since learned to place more emphasis upon communication throughout the Core. George Herbert Mead’s theory of Symbolic Interaction provides a theoretical foundation for our emphasis. He maintained that communication is the basis for both good thinking and a strong self-image. We have found that our students, upon entering college, often manifest both a weakness in thinking ability and a low self-esteem. The growing emphasis given to interpersonal communication and a developmental approach throughout the Core, especially in these informal Life Planning Seminars, grows out of our attempt to raise students’ sense of self along with their thinking abilities.

Personnel in these seminars have helped teachers become more sensitive to personality and interpersonal factors that can enhance or detract from students’ learning. Currently these seminars are being redesigned to give even more support to the Core courses. At the same time academic advising is also being more closely coordinated into the Core, with Freshman teachers constituting a sizeable number of advisors.

The intended result of this evolving Core Program is facilitation of student development for college level learning in the Freshman year. This program has worked with non-traditional students. It has also been very successful with very bright, competent students, who have thrived under the flexibility and concentration upon their own intellectual and personal development.

A distinctive feature of this Core is the degree of integration of services within it. Another feature is a consistent commitment to skill development in all courses. Usually the term Core signifies a core of knowledge and values that students are expected to acquire as educated men and women. Often this goal has been sought through divisional and interdisciplinary programs. In contrast, our program has emphasized not knowledge but know-how. This stance has brought no small amount of criticism from more traditional, disciplinary minded faculty, even within our own College. Criticism has prompted us to analyze our own position more carefully and to think through both short and long range objectives.

We believe we have good reason to concentrate upon skill development. A common complaint about students today is that they are too passive in the classroom and when doing assignments. Many textbooks are geared to passivity and tend to promote it. We believe students need to become active learners. Presenting them with a body of knowledge does not seem to be the most appropriate way to activate them. Following Jerome Bruner’s cognitive theory, which suggests that knowledge is a model one uses in dealing with repeated aspects of experience, we emphasize learning how to build cognitive models through observation, generalization, and application—that is, learning through analysis and communication. Admittedly there are other types of learning; but
certainly analytical thinking is fundamental to all sound disciplines of knowledge in the liberal arts tradition. It is also a requirement for careers in the modern world. In writing about the turbulent situation at Harvard, where the notion of a core has again been given serious attention, Susan Schiffelbein commented: "Time and its technology are sweeping us into a future filled with challenges that will require analytical ability even more than operational skills. The 'educated man' who knows isolated facts but cannot apply them will be of little use in such a future." (Saturday Review—April 1, 1978.) We take such a comment as positive reinforcement for our innovative skills' approach.

Results of the Core

A much more important reason for continuing to develop this Core has to do with how the students who have been involved in it have fared academically and personally. What has been the impact upon our students? In the Spring of 1976 an evaluation report indicated the Program had met some of its goals but narrowly missed others. One goal is to have at least 50% of the Freshmen students operate on a college level in three areas—math, science, and humanities. The result in 1976 was:

- 60% achieved college level in Science
- 47.3% achieved college level in the analytical skills of the Humanities
- 40% achieved college level in Math.

A more experienced staff did a better job in 1976-77:

- 60.8% performed overall academic work at college level (111% of goal)
- 66.8% tested at a college level of math (121% of goal)
- 65.3% tested to indicate college level knowledge of Science (119% of goal)
- 75.6% tested to indicate college level knowledge in Humanities.

By self report, students in IDS 102 indicated that:

- 66% made progress in understanding and appreciating the liberal arts.
- 78% made progress in understanding other people and cultures.
- 82% made progress in psychological and sociological thinking.

The measures for evaluation were both objective (standardized tests and analytical tasks) and subjective (self report through in-depth questionnaires). The latter evaluations are particularly important; for, our aim is not only skill improvement but also attitudinal and motivational development. It is our belief that a poor attitude towards themselves as learners constitutes a serious hindrance in the education of many students. Thus, the following self reports show a significant success in our Program:

- 73% feel better about themselves as students;
- 86% feel the instructors' criticisms are fair and helpful;
- 92% feel the instructors are interested in their students;
- 65% are more interested in reading;
- 50% are more interested in writing;
- 63% are more interested in college;
74% believe IDS is helpful in developing skills needed for future courses;
77% report progress in learning basic concepts and how to apply the courses to problem-solving decision making and other life issues.

The students' performance is in accord with their self perceptions. In a final test of analytical skills in social science in 1977, the majority successfully identified major points. They did slightly better than two control groups consisting of freshmen at a State college where the average SAT scores are 200 points higher than our own.

Advantages of an Interdisciplinary Framework

An outside evaluator rated the IDS Core very highly. In the summary of his evaluation, he pointed out that the IDS Core provides a service which we believe constitutes one of our most important functions:

"Indeed, what IDS does is to provide both definition and balance in the Bloomfield curriculum, perhaps, assuring that what has traditionally been called "General Education" can exist as a viable and vital force for a student body that faculty assume to be obsessed with vocationalism . . . the IDS component stands out as a process of convincing the student that "qualifiability" and not mere "employability" is the outcome of any education that respects both the whole person and his/her future."

The evaluator's comment also point to the creative potential of an interdisciplinary program such as this to confront productively major issues in higher education. There are several reasons why an interdisciplinary core can be so adaptive to specific situations and special problems. An interdisciplinary structure is much more flexible than a disciplinary one. A discipline has a specific commitment to a tradition of knowledge and methods, which must be imparted to students. An interdisciplinary program should be respectful of these traditions. Yet we have found that in IDS we can be freer than the disciplines to concentrate upon student development and to cooperate in establishing a common ground in learning. What an interdisciplinary core can emphasize is the general commitment to highly valued ways of thinking and communicating. It is in this general commitment that we have found our basis for a general education program that stays in tune with changing needs of students and society.

For all its strengths, we are aware that there are several serious deficiencies in this Core. We have given too little attention to the development of critical and reflective thinking. We have tried to build the foundation upon which these higher forms of thinking operate; but if our students at some point do not experience and cultivate critical thinking and mature reflection they will surely not have tasted the ripeness of a liberal arts education. Nor have we fostered creative self-expression though we have worked to support a basis for it in developing powers of synthesis and communication. There is very little emphasis upon the past within our curriculum, though we consistently try to convey a historical approach to understanding reality. In short, we have developed a program that is very good, but far from perfect. We have learned to be content with modest gains, as we have discovered with bitter disappointment that trying to do too much results in accomplishing very little. Growth for most of our students is a very slow process; we are gratified that we have been able to facilitate that growth as much as we have. What we have done here is not necessarily what will be most
appropriate at another place. What we have now may not even be appropriate for Bloomfield College in five or ten years. But I am convinced that for an effective response to important problems an interdisciplinary framework has the greatest potential for adaptation to specific situations and that it is particularly suitable for an educational program that sets student development as a primary objective.

Confronting Major Issues

As mentioned earlier, our interdisciplinary program has enabled us to confront instructively several major issues in higher education. One of these is the conflict between the liberal arts tradition and career programs. As socio-economic factors intensify pressures upon college students to find careers in specialized areas quite separate from those of liberal arts and general studies, a competitive situation has arisen which has put the latter on the defensive and in a seriously weakened position. In contrast to widespread competitiveness, we have learned to specify our learning objectives so that both liberal arts and the career programs are supported. Developed abilities in analytical thinking and communication are required for advancement in both. Our common interdisciplinary goals serve the needs of students to grow as persons and to prepare for careers. In honesty, however, the interdisciplinary program has not lessened the tension. The fluid curriculum of IDS courses makes it suspect especially to career program faculty. Furthermore, we have not given in to the narrowness that is bred by careerism; on the contrary the development of thinking in the Freshman year has led many students to question their original choice of careers and majors. Life Planning Seminars in the second year continue to provide opportunities to examine alternative careers and to explore the implications of career choice. The Core experience has also generated new ideas for upper division courses that allow students to concentrate upon issues in types of careers, such as moral implications of public policy, the ethics of medicine, the role of women in a career world, etc. But we see in our skills oriented program a basis for cooperation rather than a perpetuation of a sterile competition that has become so commonplace in higher education.

Another issue that we had to confront was the conflict in expectations between traditional faculty and non-traditional students. The vast majority of teachers in the interdisciplinary Core entered it as specialists in their own disciplines. Most of us were distraught by our experiences in the classroom and by grading papers and exams. We felt the need for a change in us rather than to sell out and contribute to academic inflation. Faculty in this Core are for the most part highly dedicated to teaching students effectively. Two years ago we spent several months in an intensive faculty development program that paralleled our emergent Core Program. Faculty development has continued to be an instrumental part of this Program, with participating faculty meeting twice each week for sustained training, consultation, planning, and evaluation. We see in this situation a challenge to learn new ways of adapting to a situation that is as risky and confusing to us as it is to our students. Along with students we have had to learn new skills, such as becoming very clear in establishing our instructional objectives, relating positively to students from cultural backgrounds different from our own, running small group discussions productively, stimulating students to develop a sense of responsibility and study skills, not to mention enticing them to find learning through reading and writing exciting and inherently worthwhile. We found that as we changed our teaching approach to that of co-learners with students in a common situation that is tough, risky, and challenging for all of us, we have begun to bridge the gap that looms between so many teachers and students.

Still another issue that our interdisciplinary program has met constructively is the
current demoralization among faculty. Our very heterogenous faculty members have now become a team of collaborators with a common set of objectives, a sense of purpose, and an opportunity for frequent interaction that provides feedback and personal support for effective teaching. One consequence of a highly flexible program is that the process and curriculum are in a constant state of flux in order to keep the Core adapted to the emergent needs of students throughout each year. This means that we regularly have to plan the courses, examine and reset specific objectives, and redefine our curriculum each semester. There is a Pirandello quality to planning meetings; our faculty is constantly in search of a curriculum. From a bureaucratic standpoint constant revision is inefficient; but a more important consequence is that faculty members develop a vital sense of ownership by shaping an evolving program that constantly provides them with a deep sense of satisfaction. Many faculty have commented that participation in the Core program has ended a growing sense of isolation and provided an experience of camaraderie not experienced since graduate school. Being involved in an interdisciplinary core is a liberal education for faculty as well as for students and one which facilitates the development of a community of learners.

A fourth major issue confronted by this Interdisciplinary Core Program is the fragmentation within general education today. A common complaint is that liberalizing in the sixties has left the liberal arts tradition in disarray. We have found that our endeavor has overcome much of the dissolution through establishing common goals and finding a common work. The interdisciplinary structure of our Core relieves competitive pressure between disciplines and fosters a sense of cooperation in learning the essentials underlying specialization. When our Core functions at its best, chemists and biologists reinforce the learning in history and literature, just as social scientists and humanists reinforce the learning of careful analysis and generalization required in the natural sciences. What students experience here is not fragmented specialties but a collaborative approach to learning and human development.

Conclusion

By being sensitive to the crisis in our classrooms in the early seventies we put together an interdisciplinary program that is notable for its concentration upon skills, integration of disciplines and various services, innovative teaching that is clearly focused and consistent, close and frequent interaction between participants, openness to adaptation, and substantial student progress. In so doing we have learned to tap the rich potentials in an interdisciplinary core that is reaching both traditional and nontraditional students and at the same time is helping resolve issues threatening the viability of higher education.