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ABSTRACT

An alternative general education program for freshmen at Albertus Magnus College is described. The program, an interdisciplinary student-centered introduction to general education, is composed of two parts that the student takes concurrently: (1) a year-long seminar in thought and expression, and (2) a sequence of four (usually 7-week) courses in particular disciplines. Both parts concern the relation of the individual to the community, specifically the city. At the core of the program is the belief that general education leads to interaction with others in a way that is both critical and creative. The program is structured around four modes of inquiry: observing and describing, making or breaking patterns, making judgments, and stating and solving problems. Students select courses from different disciplines for the first three modes, and participate in a problem-solving seminar for the fourth mode. The program was built through voluntary partnerships between faculty members from different departments who were interested in a common topic. Faculty were provided released time to become students in the partner's course and to jointly prepare syllabi and instructional approaches. (SW)

GENERAL EDUCATION AT ALBERTUS MAGNUS COLLEGE

MARY SAVAGE

[1982]

General Education at Albertus Magnus College

The Modes of Inquiry, an alternative general education program, was established in 1982 with the help of a five-year Implementation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Historical background

As a result of the educational reforms of the 1960's, Albertus replaced its highly structured curriculum with a set of college and distributional requirements. The college requirements called for six credits of Freshman English, six credits of philosophy, and six credits of religious studies. In addition, students were required to take six hours of course work in four out of five broadly defined fields of study (distributional requirements): language; mathematics and science; history and the history of fine arts; social science; literature. The principle behind these requirements was an understanding that a liberally educated person is one who has certain intellectual skills, knowledge of values (the college requirements) and who has been exposed to information from a wide variety of fields (distributional requirements).

Criticism of this system coalesced around two issues. (1) Although there was a fairly high consensus (with, however, a vocal minority party) that the content of what a student took determined her liberal education, there was very little agreement on what, in practice, that content should be. Lack of agreement about which fields were necessary for the student as well as about which courses rightly belonged to which fields (If Arts of the Renaissance was "history", why was Classical Philosophy "philosophy"? Didn't students need math and science, history and studio art?) made justifying any one requirement, and finally the set of requirements, very difficult. (2) While the hope was that the distribution of course work over several fields would produce both breadth and integration of knowledge, the structure of the curriculum itself did little to foster integration. Since, with the exception of Freshman English, students could take these requirements in any sequence, the courses tended to remain isolated experiences, enlightening and rewarding in themselves, but separate from other work the student was, had, or would take and, most especially, from her daily life and the world outside the college. Academic advisors, for example, would encourage students to take Logic in their Freshman or Sophomore year and to complete their philosophy requirement by taking Ethics in their Senior year when that course could be related to problems in their major. Students, however, were not required to follow such a sensible plan. They could even "finish" their philosophy requirement in their Freshman year. Even if, moreover, a student took Ethics when she was completing her Economics major, the curriculum did not necessarily help her relate those two experiences.

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The Freshman Program: The City and the Self

The faculty considered these issues during a long period of formal and informal investigation, discussion, and debate which, in 1980, led to the creation of the Freshman Program, an interdisciplinary student-centered introduction to general education which was sup-

ported in its first year by an NEH Pilot Grant. Called The City and the Self, the program is composed of two parts which the student takes concurrently:(1) a year-long Seminar in Thought and Expression;(2) a sequence of four (usually seven-week) courses, each given from the perspective of a particular discipline(components). The Seminar, which is the "epistemological homeroom" of the Program, bears primary responsibility for helping the student develop her intellectual skills, integrate the various disciplinary perspectives, and become aware of herself as a person capable of interacting with her world. The task of the components is to help the student develop her skills in the context of a specific disciplinary perspective. Students may select one of two sequences of components. The first sequence focuses on The City in Time and contains components in political science, sociology, mathematics, and literature; the second focuses on Images of the City and contains components in literature, psychology, biology, and religious studies. The components and the Seminar are both organized around a single theme, the relation of the individual to the community (represented by the city, most especially, by the city of New Haven). The principle which underlies the Freshman Program is that education can enhance a person's capacity to be involved, critically and creatively, in the world around her by helping her to integrate various perspectives and to become aware of her own development.

The Philosophy of the Modes of Inquiry

A similar principle underlies the Modes of Inquiry. At the core of the program is the belief that general education leads to appropriate human response to the world, that is, to interaction (dialogue) with other persons and things in a way which is both critical and creative. Most persons, however, do not know (interact with) the world in this way. Instead we are submerged in reality(we go about our day-to-day existence without noticing the world or being aware of our participation in it) or we are alienated from the world(we hold ourselves detached, over and against, reality). To participate in the world, then, we have to come to know it in an active way.

Generally, such knowing is a process of coming to know over a period of time. Of the many moments of insight or modes of understanding which are constituent of this process, the program is structured around four: observing and describing; making patterns/breaking patterns; making judgments; solving problems. Each year of the program focuses on one of these modes(not in isolation from the rest, but in conjunction with them) in order to build up and make conscious the skills necessary to that mode.

MODE I: Observing and Describing. Becoming aware of the world around us and of how we understand it.

MODE II: Making Patterns/Breaking Patterns. Understanding how we use paradigms, processes, formulae, myths, metaphors, etc., as ways of discerning order or comprehensibility in our experience of the world.

MODE III: Making Judgments. Critiquing the world, our understanding of it, our involvement in it.

MODE IV: Stating and Solving Problems. Acting on judgments, making changes.

How the Program Works

In the first three Modes, the student selects one sequence of two courses, each course from a different discipline, yet both addressing a single topic. The final Mode, Mode IV, is an interdisciplinary problem solving seminar in which a small group of students and an instructor define and attempt to solve a problem of contemporary concern. During the grant period, the following sequences will be offered:

	Sequence	Disciplines
MODE I	Human Communication	Linguistics; Sociology
	Women and Creativity	Literature; Mathematics
	Time and Space	Mathematics; Literature
	Physical and Aesthetic Ideas in the Natural World	Biology; Art
MODE II:	All in The Family	History; Literature
	Creative Minds	Italian; Drama
	Greek Culture	Classics; Mathematics
	American Religion	Religion; Sociology
MODE III	Myths and Judgment	Political Science; Religious Studies
	Human Freedom	Philosophy; Literature
	Practical Ethics	Political Science; Philosophy
	Search for Identity	Sociology; Religious Studies
MODE IV	Humanity and the Technological Revolution	Religious Studies; Sociology; Biology; Mathematics

During the five-year grant period, up to one-half the student body may elect to fulfill their general education requirement through the Modes, while the rest of the student body will fulfill this requirement through the college/distributional system. At the end of five years, the faculty will decide which of the two systems to offer students in the future.

Faculty Development Activities

Because Albertus is a small college where faculty members teach a great many courses(and often several new courses yearly), we knew the faculty would have limited time(and less psychic leisure) with which to prepare new, interdisciplinary courses. Nevertheless, the faculty was eager to renew its own intellectual energy by engaging in a new enterprize. Consequently, we decided to build the Program on the basis of voluntary partnerships between faculty members from different departments interested in a topic of common concern. In this way the Program benefits both from the faculty

member's deep roots in her/his own discipline as well as from her/his ability to join a partner in a mutual inquiry. The resultant intense dialogues among partners, especially as shared with students and other colleagues, have become the heart of the Program.

The Implementation grant supports these dialogues in two ways: (1) by providing released time for each faculty member in a sequence to become a student in his/her partner's course;(2) by funding five weeks of workshops spread throughout each year. The presence of the teacher-student in her/his partner's course extends faculty dialogue into the day-to-day work of the class and affords the students a model of a learner rooted in one discipline, engaged in understanding the world from the perspective of another, and actively involved in the process of integrating both perspectives with his/her personal experience. Faculty workshops take place the summer before courses are to be offered, during the period between semesters, and after school closes in the Spring. During these workshops, faculty members plan, develop, and adjust each of the sequences. During the summer Mode I workshop, for example, faculty members work together to heighten sensory awareness, to reflect on what it means to understand something, to investigate the disciplines as ways of understanding and interacting with the world, to develop a pedagogy supportive of students' active engagement with their world, to discover the specific focus for each sequence. At the end of the workshop, each faculty member presents a completed syllabus for the consideration of the group. During the January workshop the first course of each sequence is reviewed and revised and the transition between courses adjusted. In the Spring workshop the sequences are evaluated and revised and faculty members prepare a workshop to introduce Mode II faculty to the program.

Program Evaluation

The grant helps the faculty conceptualize and monitor the Program in two ways. During the first, third, and fifth years of the Program, two external evaluators visit the campus twice each semester to observe classes, talk with students and faculty members, and write written reports of the Program. These outside evaluators are Margaret Farley and Dwayne Huebner, both of the Yale Divinity School. The day-to-day work of the program is monitored by an in-house evaluator who participates in the workshops, visits classes, interviews and tests students.

For further information, write
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NEH Implementation Grant