

1-1-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Andersen, Daniel (1995) "Personal Recollections of Early Days at GVSU," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 14.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol13/iss1/14>

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# PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY DAYS AT GVSU

*Daniel Andersen*

Among the key policy makers and early administrators for the new Grand Valley State College were such persons as William Seidman, Philip Buchen, James Zumberge, and George Potter. Harry Jellema, a retired philosophy professor from Calvin College, certainly played an important role, perhaps the most important, in setting the direction of the college. (Apologies to any that have been overlooked!) These persons committed themselves and the faculty to search for ways that would make this new college something unique, something different from typical liberal arts colleges, something that would make it stand out.

Certainly GVSC was to be a liberal arts college, or a college where the liberal arts and sciences were to be stressed and majors only in the liberal arts and sciences were to be offered. There was no thought in those days of expanding to include professional schools. Though the planning for higher education by the State of Michigan indicated that the new college would focus upon teacher preparation and business administration, the policy makers emphasized that these would be based on a central core of the liberal arts. All students enrolled for the B.A. degree and were required to complete a foreign language requirement. (The B.S. degree, which omitted the foreign language requirement, was not introduced until years later.) All students completed the "Foundation Program," a set of nine courses in the arts and humanities, the social studies, the sciences and mathematics. The ideal was to take three Foundation Program courses each term for the three terms of the freshman year, deferring work on one's own major program until the sophomore year. GVSC was then on the quarter system, with three ten-week terms or quarters, plus a summer quarter, constituting the school year. All courses were for five term credits, in which one term credit was equal to 2/3 semester credit. Three courses for fifteen such term credits constituted a normal full-time academic load.

But such features alone would not make GVSC significantly unique. These were simply variations on the theme of the liberal arts and a general education program that were found in many colleges. In its early and formative years, the faculty and administration committed itself to some form of decentralization of the college as a way of expressing its own uniqueness. Just what form this would take and how it would be administered were issues that would be hammered out as time went on. One of the first ideas to be considered was that of organizing separate collegiate societies of roughly 1,500 students each. The Great Lakes complex of buildings—Lake Michigan Hall, Lake Superior Hall, and Lake Huron Hall—was envisioned as housing one such collegiate society. Perhaps an Islands complex—Manitou Hall, Mackinac Hall—would house another. I remember questioning in a faculty meeting whether

separate collegiate societies should require totally separate buildings in order to have a sense of individual identity. Some courses common to each such society might be taken in a common facility, especially in the sciences.

The first step in the implementation of the idea of a "decentralization" of the college was to organize the faculty into two study committees (fall, 1966, I believe). It was decided that one committee would design a new unit or "society" while the other would concern itself with maintaining the "regular" or "main" college as an effective academic institution. Each faculty member chose the committee of personal preference. I remember myself with such people as Daniel Clock, Gil Davis, Tom Goss, Margaret Crawford, Tom Bulthuis, Lee Kaufman, Bill Baum, and on the "Second Society" committee, which was significantly smaller than the other. Some of us had been meeting informally at Win Schuler's Restaurant in Grand Haven for some time, discussing various ideas for a new school. George Potter, Grand Valley's academic vice-president, appointed Don Hall to chair this group, but Daniel Clock took on this responsibility when Don went on to the position of Grand Valley's Dean of Students. The Grand Valley faculty continued to meet as a whole to take care of the ongoing business of the college.

In one of these faculty-as-a-whole meetings a most crucial issue was brought up and voted on. I missed this meeting. I think it was on the day I drove back home along Lake Michigan Drive at 80 mph to take Doris to the hospital for the birth of our youngest son. As it was described to me later, my colleague and chairman of the physics department, John Baker, brought up the issue of governance for any new unit that might be formed. Was governance to be by the GVSC faculty as a whole? Or would a new unit have its own separate faculty meetings and be independent to govern itself? Professor Baker suggested that it would hardly make sense to design a new unit for the college and not allow it to govern itself. It could be out-voted on any problem or issue that came up if the entire GVSC faculty were involved. It was moved, seconded, and passed that any new unit or branch would enjoy autonomy. This carried the implication of separate faculty, administration, and admissions process. This crucial decision affected the course of GVSC for the next fifteen years.

The Second Society Committee designed just that: a new unit or branch at GVSC. It was given the name School of General Studies (SGS). The main college was named the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). SGS was designed after a British academic model. It had a Common Program of required courses beginning with the New Student Problem Series (NSPS) in the freshman (or new student) year. NSPS included a term each of courses: Man and Society (social studies), Man and the World (the sciences), and Man as an Individual (arts and humanities). A weekly forum (lecture and discussion) to be attended by the entire SGS community was integrated into the topics of NSPS. The Common Program went on to include a Sophomore Common Seminar, a Junior Seminar, a Field Study off campus for a full term, with both a field supervisor and a campus faculty supervisor, and a Senior Project followed by a Senior Seminar in which the individual projects were discussed and critiqued.

The Common Program occupied about a third of every student's academic program. Most of the elective courses offered by SGS were called Examinations.

Students could register for such a course and not show up until a formal examination at the end of the term. Each faculty member offering such examination courses listed specific weekly days and times when students could make contact to discuss their progress in pursuing the examination goals, which were clearly spelled out by course syllabi. These discussion times quickly became discussion classes, attended by most students enrolled for these courses. The idea of being totally absent from the first day until the final examination, a common practice in European schools, was somewhat frightening to our students.

Students were encouraged to design and undertake independent studies, with appropriate faculty supervision, varying from five to fifteen credits. Course grades were either S (Satisfactory) or I (Incomplete). The S grade was to be assumed as equivalent to grade C or better in the regular grading system. The I grade carried the implication that the course could yet be satisfactorily completed at some time in the future. I do not recall that SGS required students to undertake a "major" program. They could assemble a minimum number of credits in an area of study and describe it as a "concentration" on their graduation logs if they wished.

The person who was to lead or direct SGS would have the title Chairman of the School of General Studies. Later on, this office was distinguished by the title of Dean. A crucial policy was worked out in regard to the issue of self-governance. There would be three votes on all decisions to be made, with two votes sufficient to carry a matter. The Chairman had one vote, the collective faculty had one vote (determined by simple majority of the faculty), and the Town Meeting had one vote (determined by simple majority of the entire SGS community, if my memory is correct).

In fall, 1968, SGS was opened. It had a student body of eighty. Daniel Clock as Chairman, Gil Davis, and Tom Goss were its full-time faculty. Its course offerings were rounded out with several dual appointments between CAS and SGS and the offering of several of the Examination courses by various CAS professors. As a member of the CAS physics department, I taught two of these exam courses that first year: Modern Astronomy and the Revolution of 20th Century Physics. In the spring, 1969, term, Daniel Clock asked me to be his administrative assistant on a half-time appointment, remaining with CAS physics for the other half. In fall, 1969, I was appointed full-time to the SGS faculty.

It is my recollection that growth of SGS was to be kept rather slow and deliberate. I think that plans for the second year called for a student body of 120 and the equivalent of six full-time faculty (to have a twenty-to-one ratio). But an event took place that altered these plans and would soon change the character of SGS dramatically. Unknown to us, Nasson College, a liberal arts college in Springvale, Maine, had also embarked upon a venture into experimental higher education. They created what they called "Unit II." It was a unit fully immersed in the wave of experimental education that swept through higher education in the 1960s and gradually died out in the 1970s. It was designed more in the style of Bensalem College at Fordham University, Old Westbury on Long Island, New York, and Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, than in the style of the British model that inspired SGS. There was no "Common Program." There were no required courses. Every last credit earned by a student was

by that student's personal choice. Most courses were of a seminar nature, with free discussion and interaction by all members. The lecture format was shunned. Independent (individual) studies and off-campus studies, under faculty supervision, were encouraged. Grading in such institutions was probably similar to that at SGS.

Experimental education as a whole and Unit II in particular attracted independent-minded, creative, self-motivated students and, undoubtedly, some "dead-beats" looking for an easy ride. They were students who saw an opportunity to take full control over factors in their lives that were of intimate personal concern. There certainly were many personality types, but perhaps, as a whole, students could be described as noisy, eager to sound off, quick to express themselves in various ways, even rambunctious. One needed to live in the decades of the '60s and '70s to appreciate the turmoil in our nation, politically, socially, and educationally. It was a time of "radicalization," of opposing "the system," of anti-war vigils and demonstrations. Experimental higher education was an expression of the times, of the national mood. But there was little evidence of it in higher education in conservative West Michigan. Experimental units were established elsewhere in Michigan: Justin Morrill College at Michigan State University and Monteith College at Wayne State University, perhaps, and to some extent, at the Residential College at the University of Michigan.

But Unit II at Nasson College was not autonomous. Governance at Nasson College was by the faculty as a whole, not by separate units. The more conservative and traditional faculty reached the point where they could no longer tolerate the influx of these expressive and radicalized young people. They felt that the academic integrity of the entire institution was being compromised. So, sometime during the '68-'69 school year, they voted to dissolve Unit II. It would no longer exist after that school year. Somehow Unit II became aware of the existence of SGS and the potential it had for being a truly experimental unit as they understood it. Unit II wanted to move en masse to GVSC and be incorporated into SGS. During the summer of 1969, Academic Vice-President George Potter and one or two SGS faculty (and perhaps a student or two) went to Springvale armed with GVSC catalogs, SGS information, and application forms. They personally interviewed Unit II students interested in making the move to West Michigan. I don't remember just how many of these students were admitted to SGS, but the fall, '69 term opened with 169 students. Three Unit II faculty members—Ben Beck (psychology), Hugh Haggard (philosophy and religion studies), and Don Klein (English literature)—obtained full-time positions at SGS.

During the 1969-70 academic year, the SGS program remained intact, with its Common Program and Exam courses. But change was in the wind! The influx of Unit II students and faculty carried the full impact of the wave of experimental education into GVSC. The die had been cast. The faculty and students could outvote the chairman. One can anticipate what was to transpire. The policy of giving no grades remained intact, but the Common Program—all required courses—was eliminated. Exam courses simply disappeared, being replaced by seminars. Independent studies proliferated. New, innovative pedagogical approaches were introduced, such as the "Floating seminar," in which the final description was produced at the end of the term rather than at the beginning. In due time professional internships were introduced. The

Chairman of SGS, Daniel Clock, resigned. He was replaced by T. Dan Gilmore, whose charismatic personality was instrumental in uniting the faculty and students. A "retreat" (never!) at the commencement of the school year was renamed an "advance." Such "advances" became popular; the school reunions held ever since are called "advances."

Grand Valley State College itself continued its course of decentralization. Because each new unit was autonomous, it was decided to call them "colleges" rather than "societies" and each was to be headed by a dean. Bill Baum continued through the second year of SGS on a dual appointment between SGS and CAS. Confronted with the need to decide upon one or the other of the units, he chose to remain full-time in the CAS Political Science Department. But before he left he was instrumental in having SGS change its name to Thomas Jefferson College (TJC), and Thomas Jefferson became the pedagogical hero of this unit all its days. GVSC went on to establish William James College and College IV, later renamed Kirkhof College. During the days of this federation of colleges, GVSC took the name of Grand Valley State Colleges. Each college had its unique philosophy, pedagogy, and personality. A student in any of the colleges could cross-register for courses in the other colleges to an extent determined by the student's own college. The course requirements and grading practices of the college offering the courses were to be observed.

TJC reached its maximum size in the fall, '74 term, with over 500 students. They were typical of the students described above, for TJC was now fully immersed in the wave of experimental education. The use of a testing instrument with national norms indicated a mean score of 75th percentile on academic potential and a mean score of 90th percentile on creative potential. Over one in every three TJC students went on to graduate school. Informal discussion at the 1995 Advance indicated that eventually one in every two TJC graduates may attend graduate school. The only students at Grand Valley ever to win Danforth Foundation Graduate Fellowships were enrolled in TJC.

As the '70s passed, the political turmoil of the country subsided, career orientation became the focus of higher education, involvement with and commitment to a "cause" of some kind faded away. In its early years, TJC students were rather broadly distributed across the spectrum of arts and sciences, but especially psychology, social studies of various kinds, elementary education, and the arts as a whole. In the later '70s, TJC became more a school of the expressive arts: theater, mime, dance, music, visual art. Its student enrollment declined gradually through the late '70s. It was finally terminated in spring, 1980, as part of a drastic austerity measure at GVSC. It had outlived many of its counterparts in experimental education, and it still lives on in the lives of many persons scattered around the world. The most visible physical evidence on the GVSU campus of the existence of Thomas Jefferson College is a cozy little nook with an appropriate memorial plaque along the north wall of Lake Huron Hall.