William James College's First Year: An Inside Perspective

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One of President Lubbers’ goals when he took office in early 1969 was to help steer Grand Valley State College along a course it had already begun: to provide West Michigan, and the state, with more than one pedagogical alternative for a college education in one central location (Roos, 1985; *William James College: An Unfinished Conversation,* Video tape). Two colleges were already present on the Allendale campus: the College of Arts and Sciences, and Thomas Jefferson College. By March of 1971, a planning task force, which had been working diligently for more than a year, issued a report detailing suggested pedagogy, admissions policy, curriculum, grading system, and graduation requirements for the third college, to be named after the American philosopher/pyschologist/physician, William James. That twenty-five page report was remarkable in its attention to detail: from individual descriptions for more than twenty-six proposed courses, to a carefully constructed rationale, tying the curricular structure of the new college to the life, values, beliefs and writings of its namesake.

William James College (WJC) was conceived of as an interdisciplinary, non-departmentalized entity, consisting of concentration programs, rather than majors, organized around a common core of courses to be called the Synoptic Program. Three qualities were to permeate the WJC approach to education: future-orientation, career-orientation, and person-orientation:

...William James College will be future-oriented, since its programs will correlate with society's projected needs; it will be career-oriented, since its concentration programs will lead to clearly defined professional opportunities, as well as to advanced studies; it will be person-oriented, in that its programs will stress intellectual and personal maturation within a community of learners.

Those three qualities became hallmark characteristics for the twelve years WJC flourished in the Grand Valley cluster.

Some members of the WJC Planning Task Force are still familiar and active participants in the day-to-day life of Grand Valley State University in 1995: Tom Cunningham (Chair), Mary Seeger, Don Williams, and John Batchelder. Even before the committee released their report, they had begun a national search for faculty to teach at the new college. In January, 1971, Tom Cunningham contacted William Laughlin, an anthropologist and one of my mentors at the University of Connecticut, where I was a post-doctoral fellow in Behavior Genetics, in the Department of Biobehavioral Sciences, itself an innovative academic venture. Its graduate and post-
doctoral programs were interdisciplinary: psychology, molecular biology, anthropology, genetics, and biochemistry were all represented. I saw in William James College the opportunity to apply to undergraduate education some of the exciting results of the disciplinary cross-pollination that I had been experiencing at Connecticut and, earlier, in an interdisciplinary doctoral fellowship program in neurology at Purdue.

Five other people were hired in winter, 1970, to become the founding faculty of William James College when it opened its doors in fall, 1971. Robert Mayberry was a philosopher from Penn State and Cornell, a student of English literature and linguistics, and an aficionado of French and American wines and world music. Richard Joannisese was a sociologist at the University of Chicago, interested in social theory, philosophy, and educational policy. Kenneth Hunter was a mathematician/computer scientist from the University of Wisconsin, an advanced student of Eastern philosophy, and a private consultant to business and industry. Daniel Clock was a mathematician from the University of Wisconsin and Northern Michigan University, a historian of science and mathematics. And John MacTavish was an earth-scientist, and environmentalist. Both Dan Clock and John MacTavish were current faculty members at Grand Valley and members of the WJC Planning Task Force.

Another important staff member was Ginny Gordon (presently the Administrative Assistant to the Dean of Arts and Humanities); she had been an Executive Administrative Secretary in Grand Valley's Central Administration. Ginny served as WJC's rudder, guiding its corporate body through the complex procedures involved in launching a new college, among them, ordering equipment, generating reports, typing and printing syllabi, and preparing catalog copy. Ginny showed remarkable strength and endurance in helping an idealistic and work-driven new faculty start the college without the aid of department heads. Ken Venderbush, who had been Vice-president of Student Affairs at the main college, served as a half-time acting dean and instructor in communication.

The entire student body of 160 and the six faculty members fit comfortably in the large lecture hall in Lake Huron for its orientation and inaugural meetings in September, 1971. WJC's governing body, the WJC Council, consisting of both instructors and students, engaged in many hours of weekly meetings as the new college labored to interpret and flesh out the directives set forth in the planning document for the new college.

The Synoptic Program was one of the most exciting and intellectually stimulating innovations of that document:

[it] is designed to provide student with the skills and discipline necessary for college and career work, to acquaint students with a variety of intellectual fields, and to provide students the opportunity for developing their own broad and comprehensive view of human experience. The Synoptic Program, thus, is William James College's counterpart of the programs of study offered by most colleges under such titles as "the foundation and distribution program,"
The general education program," or "the liberal arts program... Ultimately, the Synoptic Program should provide each student with the background for, the interest in, and the capability for developing his own synoptic view of life; that is, a view of life manifesting and characterized by comprehensiveness and breadth.

The program included a whole series of synoptic lectures. Invited that first year were nine prominent scholars, among them, Martin Marty, Jerome Kagan, and David Elkind. Tom Cunningham, who had planned the series and invited the speakers, was to open the series with a lecture of his own: "William James—A Man for Today." WJC faculty members had been sent a bibliography for each of the speakers, immediately after they were hired; they were to prepare their own preparatory lectures and plan to lead discussion groups and panels on each of the topics.

The Synoptic Program also had a beginning core of fourteen specialized courses, with titles such as Writing, Argument and Analysis; Symbol, Language and Linguistics; Statistics; Computer Programming; Environmental Politics and Law; Development and Evolution of Behavior; Individual and Institution; and The Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships. A group of thematic courses was also proposed. Among these were The Social Rebel In Literature; Computers And Thought; Youth In Rebellion And The Counterculture; The Human Dimension Of Environment; and The Emergence of Technocratic Man. The faculty also prepared additional courses, not proposed by WJC planning task force, but considered to be necessary to round out the concentration program offerings. Most of these courses were prepared over the Summer of 1971 and taught by the new WJC faculty in the first year.

All faculty taught three preparations per quarter. During the first few years of WJC's existence, most of each quarter's preparations were new. The time and energy demanded by this commitment to curricular development and teaching wreaked havoc on the personal lives and health of many WJC faculty and staff members in the early years. Yet, so brightly burned the flame of William James' original vision that the pace of development held steady and even quickened in the second year of the college's existence: hired then were twelve new faculty members, including six women, one of whom, Adrian Tinsley, became its first full-time dean.

Interdisciplinary concentration programs replaced traditional majors in the WJC curriculum. The first year concentration programs were Administration and Information Management, Social Relations, and Environmental Studies. In the second year, Arts and Media was added, and the Environmental Studies Program changed its name to the Urban and Environmental Studies, in order to reflect the broadening sweep of its attention.

There is no question that the faculty took the report of the planning task force seriously and used the life and philosophy of its namesake William James as a rich source of concepts, inspiration, and direction for the continued growth and development of their college. James' pragmatic approach to the technical, social, and philosophical problems of his time was considered to be a touchstone for evaluating
good teaching: "An impression which simply flows in at the pupil's eyes or ears, and in no way modifies his active life, is an impression gone to waste. It is physiologically incomplete. It leaves no fruit behind it in the way of capacity acquired." James' pluralism became a benchmark for building WJC's programmatic structure: "The truth is that all great questions form a unity and the answers come about through an ever-larger and wider embracing integration of provinces often lying far apart from one another." This was translated into WJC's transdisciplinary curriculum and non-departmental organizational structure.

A few weeks later, who was poking around a chatty memo, who produced the mess William James: . . . 'combined n (Robert Frost).

A year after this, she produced the video to express...