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William James: An Unfinished Conversation

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A few weeks ago, I received an e-mail message from a William James graduate who was poking around on the Web and saw the GVSU home page. She sent me a chatty memo, with details about her current job as a multimedia producer. She closed the message by affirming that she continues to practice what she learned at William James: connecting her personal interests and her career. She said, "I have . . . combined my vocation and my avocation as my two eyes make one in sight." (Robert Frost).

A year after the closing of William James, Barbara Roos modeled this ideal when she produced the videotape "William James: An Unfinished Conversation". Roos, who founded the Film and Video Program at William James College, chose to use video to express her commitment to the principles of alternative education that we
were living and exploring at WJC. She says she produced the tape "as a witness to the vitality of the ideas that were at the center of the college. Many of these ideas introduced by the alternative colleges of the '70s have taken root in traditional colleges throughout the nation."

Over the course of a year, Roos gathered interviews from students and faculty and worked for many months with editor Suzanne Zack to assemble the material. We all benefited from her work on this project. The taping and the public screening provided a positive way to continue to experience community and to help us deal with the loss we were feeling at the closing of the college.

The video is a series of dialogues between students and faculty, centered around such topics as grades, problem-centered learning, community, and reasons behind both the founding and closing of the college. According to Roos, "The tape is structured as it is to reflect a central value at William James: the rich insights that result from the process of dialogue."

Most contemporary mainstream media is produced with the widest possible audience in mind. This video is different. It was made for a narrow audience, the WJC community. However, the tape does communicate the nature of the college to contemporary viewers. It has been shown at conferences on education, on cable television, and in public screenings. Hundreds of tapes were purchased by individuals. At this time, as we consider the history of the colleges in the Grand Valley Review, it seemed useful to offer this tape, which provides a thoughtful discussion of many elements of WJC, as a part of our dialogue at the University.

The title of the video is significant. The tape is not just a memorial; it is a rich interchange of ideas about teaching, learning and living. Roos says, "A tape about William James isn't like a yearbook where you close the book and walk away. The conversation continues wherever we are and whatever we're doing with our lives."

Following are some excerpts from the video. To borrow a copy of the hour-long tape, contact Deb Singer in the School of Communications office, ext 3668.

Thanks to Joy Seeley and Peter Taylor for their technical assistance in digitizing the photographs from the video.
ADRIAN TINSLEY: "For me to come to a college that was going to put some emphasis on being able to 'do' in the world was really important. This [was] the desire of my heart!"

RICHARD PASCHKE: "In some ways what we did at James is what good teachers all over in other kinds of schools have always done. But they didn't have whole colleges to do it in!"

BOB BURNS: "The essence of James was really the idea of a highly personalized, highly particularized education to suit the needs of the individual student."

INGE LAFLEUR: "Feminism really seemed to be in harmony with a lot of the other things we were trying to do at William James College. A sense of cooperation rather than competition; that is, we didn't have grades, we didn't have rank for faculty, we didn't have tenure. . . . a sense of participation and nurturance rather than hierarchy or bureaucracy in forming our academic community."
ROBERT MAYBERRY: "I really think it was possible to operate with higher genuine standards with the ungraded system because... if you got into a discussion of assessment [with a student] one was not arguing about the grade that was being assigned to the project. I think we had better criticism and better standards."

STEPHEN ROWE: "The problem with most education is not that it's wrong, but that it only completes half the cycle. For every unit of impression there has to be a unit of expression—you have to engage in the kind of doing that enables the student to come into possession of the material."

AREND LUBBERS: "I felt that there probably were different ways to learn and if we could establish colleges with different pedagogical approaches and styles that might be useful in higher education."

JEAN DOYLE WJC '84: "I never heard from any teacher that 'I have the information and I'm going to put it in your head'. I heard 'this is a subject I'm really excited about, and I hope by the end of this experience you will be too. And let's go!'"

DIANE STONE: "The thing about the ungraded system was that it couldn't just take a course in politics and organize a whole class. BARBARA BOYD: "It was the beauty of the system.

KATE NOONE WJC '84: "I never heard from any teacher that 'I have the information and I'm going to put it in your head'. I heard 'this is a subject I'm really excited about, and I hope by the end of this experience you will be too. And let's go!'"
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DIANE STONEMAN WJC '83: "That was the thing about William James. You couldn't just take a course. If you took a course in politics you'd have to go out and organize a workshop."

BARBARA BOYLAN WJC '83: "That was the beauty of it!"

MAGGIE ANNERINO WJC '83: "You had to learn a lot about yourself to go through the [WJC] system. It made me dig!"

KATE NOONE WJC '81: "One of my first experiences at James, I came to class unprepared. And I wasn't being helpful to the class... and then I felt I understood what James was about."