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Milt Ford

Grand Valley State University

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THE FOURTH COLLEGE AT GRAND VALLEY

Milt Ford

When College IV opened in the fall of 1973, Bob Toft, its designer and founding dean, had been here for a year working with Mary Neal, who now works in the GVSU Alumni Relations office, to orchestrate the huge amount of work that goes into the launching of a new college, even a college within a college. College IV was to operate on a pedagogical model featuring self-paced instruction, mastery learning, and modular design of a liberal arts curriculum.

When I came from Oklahoma State University to Grand Valley in 1973, I was excited about designing a whole English curriculum for people who needed schedules which would not conflict with work and family responsibilities and would be free of speed requirements. Since we were designing a new kind of delivery system, we each had to work with the book store, print shop, records office, and all of the other support systems that make a college run. Since each of us represented a whole discipline and since the college was offering degrees in all of them, each of us was responsible for a whole academic discipline. The delivery system was self-paced and mastery-learning based, so all the material for a course and for the testing of it had to be in a permanently accessible form, for which each professor would be responsible. But that was to be only one of our tasks; when I think of those first two years, I think of double or even triple time. There were only seven of us on the faculty the first year and ten the second, and we had to represent the college on all the college-wide committees. Each of us was tied closely to the workings of the larger Grand Valley.

The key to College IV was the "module," a unit of study or block of material, a conceptual chunk of a course or curriculum, contained in a booklet which instructed the student on how to gain mastery of it. The module might include explanations of the subject matter or library assignments or the viewing of films, visiting sites, or conducting experiments. It also included self tests by which students could judge their readiness to take the mastery test through which they would be given credit for the completion of the module. Because Grand Valley was then on the quarter system and five credits was the standard course size, each module represented one half hour of course credit, and ten modules would be equivalent to one course. Although there were no classes, there was a learning and testing center where students could check out media materials, as well as a biology and chemistry lab for conducting experiments under the supervision of a professor.

Besides writing the modules, a professor was also coach or consultant when a student needed help. We were in our offices for student visits approximately twenty hours a week. The first floor of what is now the old part of Au Sable Hall where the School of Education is located was designed to house College IV. The whole central core of that section of the building was open space where students could study and

wait to talk to professors. The learning and testing center was on one side of this area and the lab on another.

The professor was responsible for keeping the testing center supplied with multiple forms of mastery tests for each module. These tests were administered by the testing center, which was open forty hours a week. Professors graded the tests and returned them to the testing center, where students could pick up the results. No grade was given until the student demonstrated mastery of the material, and, in theory at least, a student could take the test as many times as necessary to pass it. The only grade ever reported was "M," for mastery. The professors had to do credit-by-credit hand audits when a student was ready to graduate. This was a paper-work nightmare, since a total of 360 modules would have to be accounted for in order to qualify a student for graduation.

Part of what made this instructional system attractive was the clear definition of the content of the curriculum created by the objectives that defined each module. With these clearly-defined objectives, it was possible to sequence a student's learning experience to make sure that prerequisite material was mastered before a given objective was attempted. This system reached beyond the confines of a single discipline. For example, a chemistry module might have as a prerequisite a particular math module containing a mathematical principle needed in the chemistry module. It was one of my responsibilities, in the first years of the college, to keep the system organized, using a large room with course objectives on filing cards taped to the wall and connected by lines that showed the flow of learning from module to module, from the perspective of the whole College IV curriculum.

Through a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, College IV was able to engage the services of an evaluation team from the University of Michigan to do a careful evaluation for continued improvement of the system as we were constructing it. That team was in close contact with every member of the faculty and kept meticulous records on many topics, ranging from the number of hours a week each faculty member spent on preparing and delivering the College IV curriculum to their attitudes concerning how things were progressing. The team also worked closely with students to determine what was making for their success or lack of it in this kind of learning environment. The findings showed that students loved the system, but were not satisfied with the progress they were making in it. And herein lay the fatal flaw of this otherwise excellent educational creation. Because the college appealed to students who did not have access to regular classes, the college, as part of its philosophy, did not impose deadlines on any phases of the learning process. And because things are the way they are, students kept doing the things in their lives that had deadlines and time constraints and saved their studies for later. At the rate one student was completing modules, it would have taken over 150 years to complete a degree.

There were also successes. College IV attracted a number of students who wanted to move quickly and efficiently through the curriculum. The students who went to graduate school after College IV did extremely well there.

After two years of the "pure model," Bob Toft left Grand Valley, and Carl Arendsen became acting dean. Before the end of that year, Doug Kindschi had been hired as dean and was taking the leading role in designing the new College IV, which would feature a competency-based general education program, building on the liberal arts foundation of the college with such professional programs as the Hospitality and Tourism Management Program (now in the Science and Mathematics Division) and the Advertising and Public Relations Program (now in the Arts and Humanities Division). The liberal arts programs were shaped into broader entities, such as the Humanities Program (now combined with the Liberal Studies Program). In 1978 Russell H. Kirkhof, an inventor and producer of tools and parts for the auto industry, who was attracted to the practical nature of the professional programs in the recreated College IV, gave a generous gift to Grand Valley, and College IV was renamed in his honor. The college was very successful, both in attracting students and in producing graduates with a liberal arts foundation and the skills and knowledge employers in the area were looking for. When Grand Valley reorganized in 1983, the faculty, dean, and programs in Kirkhof College found new homes in the divisional structure, and the competency-based general education program played a strong role in the definition of the general education requirements of the newly structured Grand Valley State College. The Kirkhof name continues to be honored in both the name of Grand Valley's School of Nursing and the Student Center.

Many people associated with the early days of College IV made the transition into the new GVSC and continued or continue to make important contributions to Grand Valley. Bob Toft now lives outside of Washington, D. C. and serves Grand Valley in the area of grant development. Carl Arendsen, the math professor on the original College IV faculty and acting dean for a year, is a member of the Math Department. Doug Kindschi, the second Dean of College IV is the Dean of the Science and Mathematics Division. David Bernstein was the original psychology professor in the college, who was joined in the second year by Christine Falvey. Both are now in the Psychology Department. Ted Sundstrom, now a member of the Math Department, joined College IV in its second year, as did Dorothy Merrill, who recently retired from the School of Health Sciences. Don Edinger, also retired, was the biology professor on the original College IV faculty and later taught in School of Education. Gary Page, now chair of the Hospitality and Tourism Management Program, directed that program when it was part of Kirkhof College.

Both the "pure model" College IV and Kirkhof College, which developed from it, made a valuable and lasting contribution to the Grand Valley State University we know today.