THE FOUNDING AND FLOUNDERING OF THE SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES

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In the mid-1960's, American higher education came under serious attack from academics and intellectuals alike. Judson Jerome's assessment was typical: "[T]he system isn't working. The whole network of departments, fields, areas, credits, requirements, courses, grades, which we have accepted as educational design, does not relate coherently to human learning, and the network is collapsing of its own Byzantine weight." This call for radical reform was echoed by such educational critics as Father Leo McLaughlin, Fordham University's president; Elizabeth Sewell, Bensalem College's founder; Harris Wofford, SUNY at Old Westbury's president; Michael Novak, faculty member of that early experiment; and the nation's educational gadfly, Paul Goodman.

For some of us, this was a heady call. Inspired by the model of intellectuals and political activists who themselves had limited formal education—think of such 1960's luminaries as Eric Hoffer, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, Irving Howe, and Michael Harrington—we were looking for radical ways to reform college and university programs. For me the opportunity came during my interview for a position here when George Potter, our first dean, assured me that Grand Valley would grow along a British model, developing a series of satellite colleges, each with its own approach to schooling. In addition, John Freund, a member of the newly formed English Department, urged me to join him at Grand Valley in planning a new school.

Potter and Freund assured me that President Zumberge endorsed this model, encouraging faculty members to come forward with ideas for a college to complement the established College of Arts and Sciences.

So it was that I arrived at Grand Valley in 1965; and so it was that the following year John Freund—who suddenly resigned, for personal reasons, that winter—and I sent out a memorandum inviting all interested faculty to meet for the purpose of planning a satellite college. To show colleagues we meant to "invent" a new college radically different from the existing one, we headed the memorandum with the following quote from Einstein:

One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year. . . . It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to suppose that science has advanced in the last hundred years beyond the point of no return. A dozen or so faculty planning group—were off to an into the "hard core" of reform educators. We were learning and intelligently.

The curriculum was the students' college. Program focused on humanities, social concentrated studying accomplished through "experiences": formal projects, and a study supplemented within of 1968, the School itself this way:

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A dozen or so faculty members from across the various disciplines joined our little planning group—which became officially known as the Second Society—and we were off to an intoxicating start. In short order, the group sorted itself out, guided by a "hard core" of reformers ready to throw out conventional notions of how students are educated. We were determined to design a program to attract students committed to learning and intellectual pursuits for their own sake. I repeat, it was a heady time!

The curriculum we settled on contained a Common Program, occupying a third of the students' course work, distributed throughout the four years of study. The Program focused on the "study of enduring human and intellectual problems" in the humanities, social studies, and sciences. The remainder of the degree work was concentrated study in a "specific discipline or a combination of disciplines." This was accomplished through a variety of what we euphemistically called "educational experiences": forums, independent studies, examinations, seminars, off-campus projects, and a senior thesis. Grades were either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, supplemented with written evaluations.

Preparing to enroll our first students in the fall of 1968, the School of General Studies (SGS)—as we were then called—described itself this way:

... a four-year liberal arts college offering programs leading to the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Philosophy degrees. While offering its students all the educational resources of Grand Valley, the new School provides students with unusual opportunities for multidisciplinary study as well as significant freedom and responsibility.

Today, SGS's program seems hardly radical—no doubt a measure of how much higher education has changed in the past three decades—but we had a struggle getting the entire Grand Valley faculty to approve the final plan, as was required. Only an eleventh-hour plea by the Physics Department's John Baker swung the narrow margin.

From my perspective, SGS's first two years unfolded as we had planned, except that we were not attracting the numbers of students we needed to increase our faculty. No doubt most high school students and their counselors were put off by this unorthodox approach to higher education going on in a Western Michigan cornfield. We were also burdened by the difficulty the admissions staff had explaining to prospective students what we were doing. (And, of course, it's possible the staff neither understood, nor sympathized with our program.)

Our slow growth led to the ill-fated plan to swell SGS's ranks by incorporating faculty and students of a failed experiment at Nasson College (Maine). Immediately, Thomas Jefferson College (TJC)—as we were now known—almost doubled in size. Worse yet, we were overwhelmed by new students and faculty openly hostile to our program. They scorned our avowed intellectual approach as elitist, rejecting the
idea—as Michael Novak put it—that "logic, clarity, precision, technical competence, verbal skill, [and] the reading of books have more educational value than their opposites." What they wanted was a humanistic approach to creating a "learning community," drawing heavily on encounter groups, psychodrama and Gestalt training, in order "to clear away the emotional furniture" impeding learning.

Within a few years, our experiment in educational reform was subverted by counter-culture warriors, whose goal of deconstruction included, among other things, the complete abandonment of the Common Program, to be replaced by no requirements at all! Thus, a student could complete a Bachelor of Philosophy degree by taking all 180 quarter hours in one subject—as at least one student did. The grading system was discarded as coercive and oppressive. Worse yet, many TJC faculty members, deeply committed to the human potential movement, replaced academic studies with courses in psychological voodoo, from Yoga and meditation to EST and Rolfing, and many students were only too happy to seek therapy rather than academic instruction.

Encounter groups and sensitivity sessions sprung up like mushrooms, later to be coupled with an especially virulent brand of true-believer politics that scorned opposing points of view as fascist deception.

Despite the abundant rubbish going on in TJC during those dark days, many students still came to study in a setting of responsible freedom, reflecting the original SGS plan. But too often we had students and faculty working at cross purposes, which produced some ugly confrontations. Two examples come to mind. The early one involved first canceling, then relocating the Junior Seminar because some students disrupted it as an intellectual, elitist activity inconsistent with their view of TJC as a "learning community." For me, the most interesting confrontation came when I advised the Women's Playwriting Cooperative that they could not legally give their theater performance "for women only" in a Grand Valley—and therefore public—facility. My action prompted some students and faculty members to begin "de-tenure hearings" on the grounds that I lacked the TJC spirit. One can imagine their fury when I gave them the bad news about the illegality of this effort as well.

Were it not for the students who continued to come to study at TJC, I would have parted long since; but these were students to inspire any faculty member. Indeed, there was widespread agreement among faculty in the other three satellite colleges—William James College and College IV had been added—that TJC had Grand Valley's best and worst students. For the worst, TJC was politely referred to as a respectable place "for the downward mobility of upper-class students"; sadly, some were either on their way to mental breakdowns, or between recurring episodes. But working with TJC's best—those who took education seriously—was an unalloyed joy. These were the students CAS faculty could not get enough of in their classes: Grand Valley's best and brightest.

Before TJC was put to rest in 1979, there was a brief flurry of activity to return it to something like its original intention; but by then few students were looking for alternative education, and TJC's growing notoriety deterred those who were. Our reputation had caught up with us. Yet at its best, TJC enriched the Grand Valley community in ways that none of the students who came for the TJC découpage, never imagined.
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"TJC, I would have member. Indeed, our three satellite said—that TJC had politely referred to students"; sadly, between recurring seriously—was an enough of in their activity to return it were looking for who were. Our the Grand Valley community in ways no other satellite college did: there were the splendid students who came for the freedom and direction some of us provided; there was also our outstanding downtown theater, Stage 3; and, of course, there were the celebrated National Poetry Festivals, the jazz workshops, and a variety of other creative arts contributions. At its worst, TJC was impossible to defend, and its closing came as no surprise. Of the faculty, most were left without work, unlikely to teach in higher education again—mercifully!
One of three TJC faculty members folded back into CAS, I was returned half-time to my original home, the English Department; the other half of my time was spent directing the new Honors Program. I suppose this gave me another chance to do some educational fiddling, especially since the Program stressed interdisciplinary approaches as well as independent studies, drawing its faculty from departments throughout GVSU. But by the 1980's these were less than radical ideas, which are—happily—still flourishing in the GVSU Honors Program. As I review my comments here, I am reminded of how disheartened I was to see our educational experiment partially destroyed by anti-intellectual, counter-culture warriors with little interest in education and less in academic pursuits. The original faculty members had named SGS for Thomas Jefferson because we wanted to identify our aims with this country's most celebrated intellectual, one who personified Emerson's "American Scholar": man thinking and man acting. For us, Jefferson's achievement as an intellectual and man of civic action represented the TJC ideal, and we wanted our students to aspire to his model. Considering TJC's reputation then, and the unflattering picture most colleagues today have of our modest experiment, we did Jefferson a great disservice.