

Comments on "The Tutorial"

Alan Jones
Spring 1999

The 1970 proposal for a required tutorial in the freshman year gave attention to three related needs: (1) the need for an improved advising system in an open curriculum without requirements; (2) the need for a regular writing experience in the freshman year; (3) the need for closer, and more personal and informal faculty/student contact in a time of trouble on college campuses.

The proposal originated in the context of a long curricular debate in the fall of 1970, a debate which continued curricular and policy discussions during the 1969-70 academic year. These discussions ranged over many topics including newly revised graduation requirements which included 36 credits in humanities, social studies, science, foreign languages, and fine arts. These requirements dominated the freshman and sophomore years leaving students little voice in what courses to take. The underclass advising system was a registration system in which every faculty member could be an adviser (without credit), signing registration cards without much attention to student choice. In 1969-70 many faculty members complained of the revised

requirements, as unhappy with courses they were required to teach as were students with courses they were required to take. Students at mass meetings in the fall of 1969 demanded an equal voice in making academic policy, proclaiming in their manifesto: "We must demand a significant voice. Our interests have been ignored. Our rightful and legitimate enfranchisement has been denied."

At the same time in the fall of 1969, other mass meetings were supporting the Vietnam Moratorium. Some students went off to the Weather Underground's Days of Rage in Chicago. Others paraded at homecoming with a Vietcong flag. The FBI visited the campus. A mostly blacked out FBI report said "This college has a widespread reputation in the Midwest as being of the ultra-liberal type."

All of this was relevant to curricular change and the tutorial program. An ultra-liberal freshman, Barry Zigas, (now a Vice-President of Fannie Mae) organized Vietnam Moratorium marches and was the major student proponent of curricular change. I served with him on a Freshman Year Committee in the spring of 1970, a hot sunny spring marked by student support of a strike by physical plant workers, by the student seizure of the

ROTC building, and the closing of the college two weeks early after Kent State and Nixon's incursion into Cambodia. The year ended in a mood of protest, rumor, and the fear of bombs.

Curricular discussion continued in a Faculty Summer Study Committee. At the first faculty meeting on August 28 the committee reported that it had no single recommendation; it suggested three options: 1- The existing curriculum, 2 - A curriculum with 32 credits of divisional distribution requirements, 3- A curriculum with no requirements other than a limitation on the number of credits in a major field. This 3rd option, known as the "Clotfelter Proposal" had been circulated earlier in the spring by Beryl Clotfelter, the new chair of the faculty, and had the support of students, who now attended faculty meetings.

Weekly meetings on the curriculum dragged on all fall in a mood of drifting indecision. The S&B now complained of student "Apathy", adding: "The faculty has not set the best example in dealing with academic reform. The eleven weeks of debate on the requirements issue may have preempted the discussion of other issues." The faculty heard the several proposals for curricular change were presented; amendments and straw votes multiplied;

on September 21st the Clotfelter proposal came to the floor; on October 12 it became the basis for further discussion after an attempt to revive distribution requirements failed. But there was still hesitancy about no requirements. Some faculty members were anxious about advising in a no-requirement curriculum; others worried about writing and sought to retain the old Freshman Humanities requirement. On October 26th Professor Clotfelter amended his proposal with a provision for a tutorial that Barry Zigas and I had suggested along with a rationale that aimed to solve advising and writing needs and to experiment with a new unstructured learning experience for entering students – written evaluations rather than grades; faculty offices or private homes rather than classrooms. The tutor would be the underclass adviser for twelve students and would be given teaching credit for his work – basically, evaluating biweekly essays by members of the tutorial in informal meetings of four or five students. Only about 30 advisers would be needed, the number of faculty members who were competent to advise in the opinion of Dean Walker, the Director of Advising. A Freshman Year Committee would be created to recommend tutors, to set guidelines for tutorial topics, and to recommend further innovation in the freshman year.

The curriculum debate continued for another month. There were straw votes on keeping existing requirements; 40 to 21 against humanities, 55-10 against science and foreign language; 50-5 against the fine arts, 51 to 6 against social studies. Finally, on November 16, the tutorial proposal passed 56-6 and then the Clotfelter proposal (with the tutorial as a graduation requirement) was approved 48-12.

A pilot program of four tutorials was organized in the second semester of 1970-71. In the fall of 1971 a full range of tutorials were offered on a range of topics that appealed to faculty members who taught them and to students who selected them (usually as a first or second choice). It was a simple program, emphasizing better advising, regular writing, and close faculty/student relations. End of semester evaluations were uniformly high. The Freshman Year Committee recommended topics and tutors, and also vetoed topics and tutors. Dean Walker organized summer writing workshops for tutors and hired more people for the writing lab. For a number of years the program thrived as planned. Then, as the mood of innovation waned, students and faculty returned to the routine of regular courses. The registrar set a time (8:00 a.m.) and classrooms to meet in; faculty members gave more attention to library research and term papers

than to short essays; students (and faculty), now mindful of graduate school requirements, wanted grades. The Freshman Year Committee and the idea of further change disappeared. The tutorial took on other responsibilities – computer literacy and library orientation and oral skills. It became another course, or as some now say, a Freshman Seminar.

But with the experience of teaching many tutorials since 1970, I believe the tutorial has continued to be a vital element of underclass learning at the college, an experience that contributes to the college's still distinctive emphasis on advising, on its attention to writing across the curriculum, and on the continuing close relations of its faculty and students.