

**T**his fall marks the 25th year that the First-Year Tutorial has been a hallmark of a Grinnell education.

*Grinnell's tutorial program provides a place for students to participate in challenging discussions and to gain valuable academic advice. This is a place where students learn about writing and critical analysis. And, above all, the tutorial—from the first meeting during New Student Orientation—gives students the opportunity to establish close student-faculty relationships.*

*Here, as we celebrate 25 years with the tutorial, we trace the program through the past quarter century.*

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T W E N T Y - F I V E      Y E A R S      L A T E R

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# The First-Year Tutorial

by Jason Wolf '95

## Making History

A few events set the stage for Grinnell's tutorial system.

President Howard Bowen in his last convocation address in 1964 remarked on the ideal of a tutorial style of learning, and, while on sabbatical in England in 1966, Professor of History Alan Jones '50 became familiar with tutorial methods of instruction.

A major effort at curricular reform in 1968 added new graduation requirements in social studies and science and provisions for independent and off-campus study. Students and faculty alike greeted the new course requirements with skepticism. The hectic spring of 1970 found both groups examining alternatives: the faculty entertained ideas of dropping requirements

and students demanded a voice in curricular matters.

A Freshman Year Committee met in the spring of 1970 and first-year student Barry Zigas '73 and Jones discussed a nongraded tutorial as a college requirement. Dean Waldo Walker, who supervised the cumbersome faculty-advising system in which all faculty participated, was interested in a more selective system in which faculty members received teaching credit for advising.

Curricular debates were cut short in the spring of 1970 when the college closed early after Nixon's Cambodian "incursion" and the killing of four college students at Kent State. During the summer, faculty discussion of the curriculum continued. When classes resumed in the fall, debate centered on a proposal from Professor Emeritus of Physics

Beryl Clotfelter, who chaired the faculty at the time, to drop all graduation requirements except those limiting study in the major field and in one division.

Twelve weeks of curricular discussion by the faculty in the fall of 1970 centered on the "Clotfelter Proposal," particularly on dropping the freshman humanities requirement and its emphasis on writing. Toward the end of the debate Jones and Zigas introduced the idea of a first-year tutorial that emphasized writing. Clotfelter embraced the idea and added it to his proposal. The faculty adopted the "open curriculum" with the only requirement being a first-year tutorial.

This curricular program, or as some would say, this noncurriculum, has lasted 25 years, longer than any curriculum in the college's history.

## Setting Goals

When the faculty approved the "Clotfelter Proposal," they created a curriculum infused with the independent spirit that marks Grinnell's campus today.

In his book *Pioneering 1846-1996: A Photographic and Documentary History of Grinnell College*, Jones writes that the change was "a pioneering adventure into free and open curricular territory." He compares it to the "free and open" changes in the residential system that occurred at the same time. Jones also quotes then President Glenn Leggett as saying "Philosophically, the new curriculum represents a complete and radical departure from what has gone before. This does not make it bad."

The original tutorial had three main goals:

- To achieve closer faculty/student relations in an informal nonclassroom setting without grades.
- To improve the advising system by having the tutorial professor act as the student's adviser until the student declared a major field; the faculty member would receive teaching credit for tutorial responsibilities.
- To provide a context for first-year student writing, usually short writing exercises and essays.

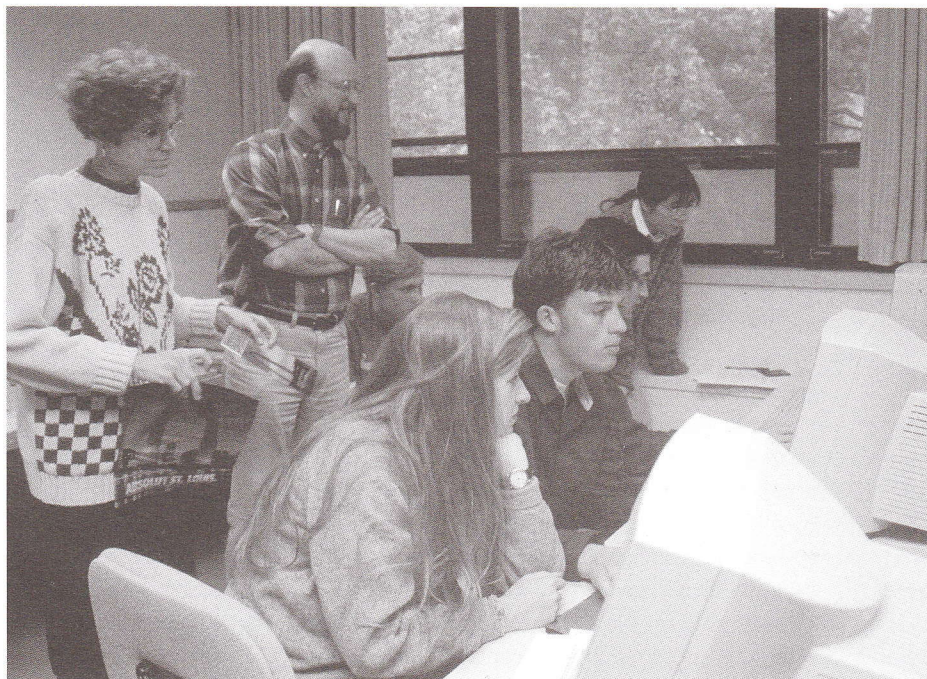


photo by Margaret Rauber

**Susan Strauber, associate professor of art, and Bob Cadmus, professor of physics, team taught "Image, Reality, and Illustration" last fall.**

After some pilot tutorials in the second semester of 1970-1971, the program went into operation in the fall of 1971. Some 30 faculty members selected topics they would like to teach, and students selected a topic to study from these choices. There were about 12 students in a tutorial group. This was a departure from the large class size in

first, second, or third tutorial choice.

For a few years, a Freshman Year Committee supervised tutorial topics and tutors. That task was later turned over to the dean and to the director of academic advising. In keeping with the experimental sentiment of the early 1970s, the first tutorials were ungraded. Grades were gradually added to the tutorial "when the mood and spirit of the late 60s dissipated," Jones says. After several efforts at nonletter grade evaluation, letter grades were restored in 1983.

## The Face of Learning

Since its beginning, all parties have been generally satisfied with the tutorial program.

"The faculty had the opportunity to teach topics of interest that often developed into courses and seminars," Jones explains. Students enjoyed the freedom

to choose a topic of interest to them rather than begin their first year in required courses. The administration discovered that

the old prescribed first-year requirements. Since the beginning, about 90 percent of first-year students have received either their

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the advising system improved as faculty came to know students better and, importantly, more informally.

At first the tutorial program resembled its British inspiration. Professors would divide their class, typically about 12 in number, into groups of three or four and hold weekly office meetings with them to discuss their writing assignments.

"The emphasis was on essays rather than the typical research paper," Jones says. Summer faculty writing seminars were introduced (and have remained) to improve the teaching skills of faculty members who did not traditionally teach writing. This, with the addition of the writing laboratory, has encouraged "writing across the curriculum."

Over the years the informal, nonclassroom character of the tutorial changed (Jones says "bureaucratized") with a regu-

adviser who knows them.

"Every fall, students always say they like the tutorial because it was informal, and they had a better relationship with other students in the class and with the professor," she says. In addition to teaching students to write and give oral presentations, the tutorial helps smooth the transition from high school to college.

"Don Smith graded meticulously so it shaped how I learned to write," says Matt Haber '95 who chose "The Enlightenment" as his first-year tutorial. "But my tutorial also helped me understand exactly what the academic part of college was going to be all about. And it introduced me to lots of people, most of whom I'm still friends with."

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lar place and time on the weekly calendar. Many tutorials simply had the character of small informal seminars, however that was still quite different from introductory courses in large universities.

According to Director of Academic Advising Jo Calhoun, first-year students gain more than writing skills and having an

## Confessions of a Reluctant Tutorial Professor

by Mark Montgomery, associate professor of economics

*A few years ago, I had the following conversation with the chair of my department:*

*"Montgomery, you still haven't taught a tutorial—the exciting opportunity to serve as a mentor and adviser to 12 first-year students, to conduct a seminar that nurtures their writing style and hones their discussion skills in an informal classroom atmosphere. You are planning to do this, aren't you?"*

*"Well, sure, but there is one thing I was hoping to do before I taught a tutorial."*

*"What's that?"*

*"Die."*

It isn't that I didn't understand the idea of a tutorial. The relationship between adviser and student is taken seriously at Grinnell. So are writing and oral communication. Why not combine the advising relationship with an informal class in writing and talking for first-year students? Unlike a "regular" course, the subject of the tutorial would matter less than the process of exploring it in a group and the learning skills

that were developed. Great. Made perfect sense to me. It is just that my enthusiasm for the tutorial concept stopped short of actually wanting to teach one. My reasons were several.

First, the whole thing sounded a little too touchy-feeling for my taste—I mean, no lecturing, just sitting around discussing things. There are, of course, scores of courses at Grinnell for which discussion is the main vehicle of learn-

ing, but I don't happen to teach them. In my primary courses—microeconomic theory, mathematical economics—there isn't much scope for discussion. (What could we talk about? "Bob, what do you think is the determinant of this hessian matrix? Sally, as a feminist, do you agree with Bob?")

In the tutorial, I would have to sit back and let the students do most of the talking. Many professors like that, but I am more comfortable in my usual role of standing for hours at the blackboard numbing the students into submission with an endless series of diagrams and equations. It's what I'm used to—I gotta be me.

Secondly, all of the people in my tutorial would be first-year students—raw recruits, fresh out of high school. As their adviser, I would have to help them deal with all of their adjustment-to-college problems. I am not accustomed to such students. I sometimes have first-year students in intro to econ, but the bulk of my students are tough, battle-tested

veterans—hard, leather-faced, the kind who chew tobacco in class and spit on the floor. (I exaggerate slightly, but you get the point.) Of course, second- and third-year students sometimes come to me with problems, but their problems are the kind I have been trained to solve:

*(Enter Susan, forlorn, eyes downcast:)*

"Mr. Montgomery, I can't seem to find the cost-maximizing combination of inputs for the competitive firm."

"Just set the isoquant tangent to the isocost line, Susan."

"Great, thanks."

*(Exit Susan, whistling merrily.)*

I wasn't sure I knew how to deal with first-year-type problems.

"Mr. Montgomery...*(sniff)*... I'm flunking all my classes because I'm homesick, I miss my boyfriend, and I don't know if I'm ready to be in college."

"Ummm,...have you, ah...tried

changed some over the years to encompass other skills vital for academic success, including attention to oral skills, computer skills, and library research methods.

## Keeping Up With the Times

From the beginning, Grinnell's tutorial program has offered a wealth of stimulating topics.

"The topics continue to change to pick up current literary, social, and political issues," Calhoun says.

Because faculty members pick their own topics, over the years many topics have been linked to current issues of importance. Early tutorial offerings included Gregory Guroff's tutorial on "Soviet Society Today: Where Did It Come From, Where Is It Going?"

Other tutorials narrowed their focus



photo by Andy Kropp '98

Russian writer Tatyaha Tolstaya joined a dinner discussion in Anatoly Vishevsky's tutorial, "Fairy Tale and Fantasy in Soviet Literature: The Art of Defiance."

setting the isoquant tangent to the...ah, ummm..."

This worried me.

In spite of these reservations, I taught a tutorial. My hesitation was overcome by two things: a) a realization that to grow as an educator I must continually accept pedagogical challenges, and b) a direct order from the academic dean—"You WILL teach a tutorial."

So I had to come up with a topic. The administration gives professors wide latitude in choosing a subject; it does not have to be within one's field of expertise. I thought this was a good idea. In fact, I chose a tutorial on "Technology and the Environment" not because it was something I knew I could teach, but because it was something I wanted to learn more about. I figured that even if this tutorial turned into the living hell I was expecting, I would at least walk out of there with something.

My first day of tutorial was a shock. For one thing, I discovered that sitting down and listening to a vibrant discussion can be more

fun than standing at the blackboard yammering away for an hour. Moreover, though we had our first session at 8 a.m., these 12 new students were alert and interested for the solid hour and a half. They didn't think it odd to be learning at that hour of the day. (If you make Grinnell seniors get up at 7:45 a.m., they forward your name to Amnesty International.) Also, it turned out that I found teaching these "raw recruits" to be rather refreshing. They hadn't yet learned how to manipulate the system and snow their professors.

For example, they wouldn't come to your office and try something like this:

"Mr. Montgomery, I should get more points on question five, where the price of steel goes up."

"But you wrote that the price of steel goes down."

"Yeah, but I meant that the price of steel goes up."

There were some adjustments, of course. By the fourth week, I could tell they had encountered a

fundamental principal of human physiology: anyone hoping to pass morning classes must eventually go to sleep before 2 a.m. But overall, their enthusiasm was contagious. Also, the group was not only enthusiastic, but amazingly diverse in perspective. Only two-thirds of my tutees were American. The other four came, respectively, from one of the world's poorest countries (Ethiopia), one of the most polluted (Poland), the world's most populous (China), and a country in near economic chaos (Russia). It was fascinating to hear students with such a wide range of experiences talk about things like the effect of economic development on the environment.

Aside from the economics, another great thing about the tutorial was that the dean gave us an entertainment budget. I was able to bring orange juice and donuts once a week. While I doubt this advanced the education of a single tutee, it did wonders for my mood. We also had enough left over to hold an evening movie/pizza party. I rented a sci-fi video called *The*

*Alfa Incident*, which I (mistakenly) thought related to our tutorial topic. The class gathered in my living room to watch it. This was a powerful bonding experience because, irrespective of our different religious, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, we were united in the belief that I had rented the worst film in the history of Western cinema. (Except for Nate, who kept saying, "No, for science fiction, this really isn't too bad." We were all a little worried about Nate.)

So, was teaching my first tutorial a "personal growth" experience? In the sense that eating all those donuts has made me a larger person, I would definitely say yes. But, I also have to admit that I discovered some things about teaching and learning. I have taught other tutorials since then, and, I must confess, I want to teach another one. ■

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to specific issues. For instance, changing views on computers can be traced by examining topics from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. In 1976-1977 and again the next year, math professor John Vogel taught "The Computer Threat to Society." At a time when computers were poised to move out of high-tech operations and into the American mainstream, the computer was a hot topic. Two years after Vogel's tutorial, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science Henry Walker offered a tutorial entitled "The Computer: Threat to Society?" In 1980, and again in the ensuing year, Professor David Reiner embraced the public's acceptance of computers, teaching "The Computer: From Fiction to Fact."

The trend of connecting topics to current issues continued in 1984 when "George Orwell's 1984 and Beyond" was

offered as a group tutorial by tutors from four departments with various visiting lecturers adding commentary to the issue. When widespread famine in Ethiopia and other African countries was in the head-

lines, Associate Professor of Russian Helen Scott gave students a chance to study the transformation in the tutorial "From the Revolution to the Present."

Not all tutorials are focused on current trends. The old humanities course on "The Ancient World" has regularly been taught as a tutorial. The most popular tutorial during the 1995-1996 year, based on the number of students requesting it, was "Normalization in the Nursery: The Political Subtext in Children's Literature," which examined class, gender, race, and sexual roles in children's stories.

"I think it was so popular because it is a new twist on familiar material," says Associate Professor of Philosophy Johanna Meehan, who taught the tutorial.

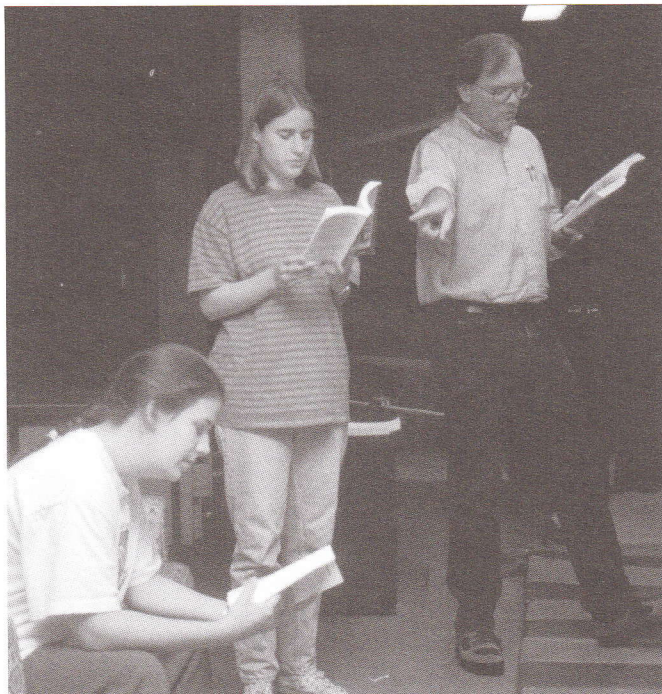
Another popular tutorial, which has been offered every few years since 1971 is

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*Students often make careers out of their tutorial. Deborah Swackhamer '76, an environmental chemist who is considered a leading authority on water quality issues in the Great Lakes, says her tutorial first made her realize that she might enjoy a career studying water.*

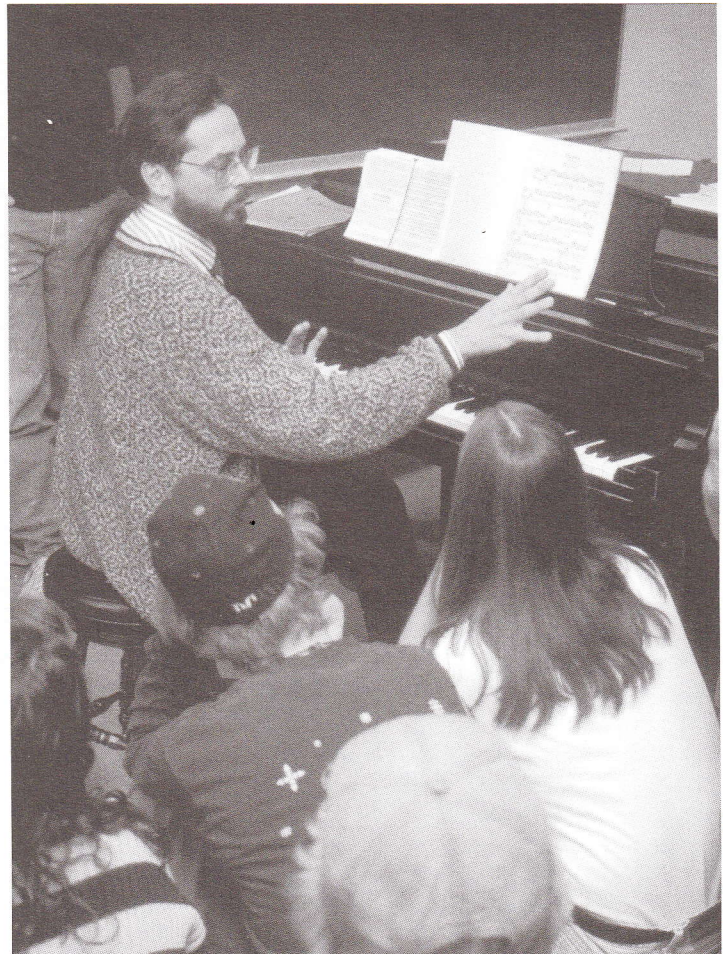
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lines, Professor John Dawson taught "Africa: Food or Famine." As environmental issues emerged, first-year students could select "Silent Spring to the Present: Environmental Controversies." When communism crumbled in the Soviet Union,



**Above:** All the world's a stage in Professor of Theatre Jan Czechowski's the "Irish Theatre" tutorial.

**Right:** Associate Professor of Math and Computer Science Royce Wolf taught "Math and Other Arts" last fall.



photos by Margaret Rauber

# Second Choices Are Important

## PROFESSOR HOWARD BURKLE AND THE FIRST-YEAR TUTORIAL

by Catherine M. Gillis '80

*The summer of 1976 was extraordinary. It was the Bicentennial year, with exuberant celebrations made memorable from the parade of Tall Ships to extravagant fireworks across the country. It was the year of the "Bicentennial Minute" on television. It was an election year. It was an Olympic year.*

And it was the year I left home, confident, scared, expectant, and still a little bit shy, for the beginning of my "Grinnell Experience."

During the weeks prior to my journey into the heart of Iowa, I readied myself as best I could. I filled out the various forms I was sent on housing preferences, the meal plan, and my first-year tutorial. Today, 20 years later, the actual titles of the tutorials offered that year have long since faded into memory.

What I do recall is that I did not get my first choice.

Late in August 1976, armed with a campus map, I found my way to Steiner Hall: a cramped, closed in building whose dark wooden floors were as menacing as its white-washed walls were inviting. I was nervous. I was about to meet my tutorial professor who would also serve as my academic adviser. I remember how creaky the stairs felt, how lonely the climb was. I wasn't the bold, bright, field hockey captain I'd been just a few months ago, a high school senior

who knew it all—no, I was just another dumb first-year student.

Then I entered the office of Professor Howard Burkle. What did I see? A shock of silvery-white hair, a leathery tan face and the most sympathetic eyes I have ever met. My nervousness melted away.

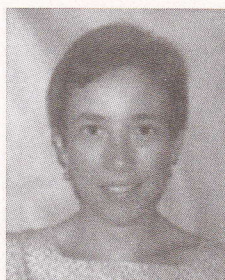
I knew instinctively that I had done well with my second choice.

Our tutorial itself? Well, again, memory fails me for I cannot recall the precise title of Professor Burkle's tutorial. Yet, still vivid in my memory are many of the books we read and heatedly discussed, as are the other students who were part of this group.

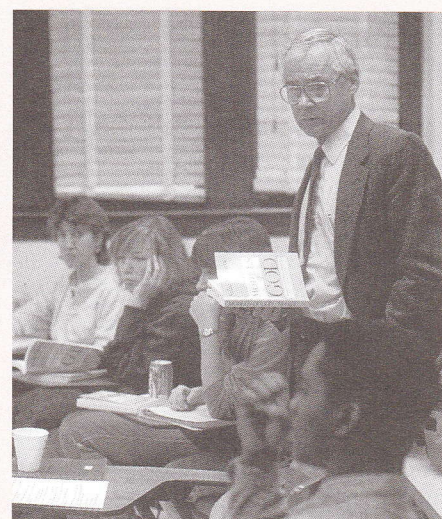
Who were we?

We were a football player from California. A tall, aspiring writer from Utah. A passionate Zionist from Chicago. Three students from Long Island. We were, in short, a wonderful cross-section, a prototype of the diversity we would all discover was one of the most special things about Grinnell.

We read diverse works, too—from *Snow Country* to *No Exit* to



Catherine Gillis '80



Right: Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies Howard Burkle leads a tutorial discussion.

*The Plague*—trying to integrate the range of cultures, religions, philosophies, and life experiences those books described into our own. Throughout the semester, Professor Burkle remained the unifying, gentle, though rigorous force he had seemed to me that first day.

I took another course later in my college career from Howard Burkle, and, of course, he remained my academic adviser, helping to steer me toward my eventual double major in English and economics and encouraging me to apply to the Grinnell-in-London program.

In 1990, I returned to Grinnell for my 10-year anniversary. There was only one faculty member I sought out, whom I had to see.

When Howard Burkle, still in the cramped, odd-shaped office in Steiner Hall, saw me, said my name, and gave me an embrace, I knew, once again, that my second choice had been for me the unforgettable one, the right one. ■

*Catherine M. Gillis is manager of market research and planning at Vetrotex Certaineed Corp. in Valley Forge, Pa., where she is involved in economic analysis and forecasting. Because Vetrotex is a French owned company, she has learned French on the job. "Anytime you're a liberal arts graduate, you can adapt," she explains. She has been training to run in a marathon in November in Pennsylvania.*

"Water." Taught by Professor of Chemistry Luther Erickson, this tutorial has focused on the distribution, origins, and geology of water. Students begin by reading Thoreau's *Walden* to learn about attitudes toward nature. After examining the chemistry of water, the topic turns to the economic and political conflicts that result from competition for water.

As new material was published and new information revealed about water, Erickson changed the course content to fit these developments, so the 1994-1995 version barely resembled the course by the

same name taught in 1971-1972.

Occasionally, students even make a career out of their tutorial. Chemistry major Deborah Swackhamer '76 who was in Erickson's first "Water" offering is now a professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. An environmental chemist who is considered a leading authority on water quality issues in the Great Lakes, she says her tutorial first made her realize that she might enjoy a career studying water.

"The 'Water' tutorial showed me lots of ways to apply chemistry to real world

problems. It really opened a lot of doors for me," says Swackhamer, who earned a Ph.D. in water chemistry from the University of Wisconsin.

As the tutorial approaches the end of the 20th century, its creators can be proud of its accomplishments. Tutorials still introduce students to the college's "free and open curricular territory," and the tutorial's ability to adjust to the times guarantees that the tutorial program will continue to grow and prosper. ■

*Gail Gaboda contributed to this article.*