



# **TUTORIAL**

## **Celebrating Forty Years**

**Grinnell College Libraries**  
**Department of Special Collections and Archives**  
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## **History of the Tutorial**

In his last convocation speech as president of the college, Howard Bowen delivered an address he called "Game of Numbers, Revisited," alluding to the speech he had given at a previous convocation. In this 1964 address he expressed his deep desire to improve the foundations of education, not simply the reputation of the college. Bowen wished for students to take responsibility for their own learning, stating that Grinnellians should "acquire the capacity to learn independently and without close supervision." He encouraged his audience "to try out some ideas about the way education might be conducted at Grinnell College in the future." One of these ideas was borrowed from the tutorial style of learning at Oxford and Cambridge.

Able to study the tutorial first hand during his sabbatical in 1966 was Professor of History Alan Jones. The tutorial, Jones noted, solved three main problems of Grinnell's curriculum: the distant relationship between professor and student, the lack of an effective advising

system, and the lack of training in writing and oral presentation skills for first year students. Jones wrote: "Oxford and Cambridge, with the tutorial system, have long provided a highly successful variant of the European system by providing systematic supervision of the student with the general context of freedom." The tutorial's small class size, emphasis on one-on-one and group work, and its informal setting – meeting in a professor's home for example – seemed to successfully solve these problems.

The Grinnell curriculum, however, would need a "complete and radical departure from what has gone before," as President Leggett noted in 1968. That year, Grinnell underwent a set of sweeping curricular changes with the addition of several new graduation requirements. These included 36 credits in humanities, social studies, science, foreign language and fine arts. These left little room for electives and took up most of the freshman and sophomore years. Any faculty member could be an advisor and simply sign student registration cards without much attention. 1968 was also a year of confrontation and upheaval, both on campus and in the wider world. There was dissatisfaction with the way things had been done and a deep desire to effect change. A new curriculum was one way to break with the past.

The first push towards curricular change might have come from Howard Bowen, but the creation of the new curriculum was a process that involved checks and stalemates, evaluations and long discussions, and re-training for faculty members not accustomed to teaching writing or advising students.

In an opinion piece that appeared in the first issue of the *Scarlet & Black* during the 1971-1972 school year, senior Greg Vranicar referred to 1969 as “the year of confrontation.” “As the 1969-1970 year began, we all wished, I believe, for what might be termed a ‘return to normalcy. The year was anything but normal.” For Grinnell students, it was not only the Vietnam War or the general feeling of unrest that vibrated all across America and into their homes, but it was also the curricular debates taking place at their own institution. Controversy surrounded the development of a new curriculum, but the loudest of the demands from students was one for inclusion. Jon Andelson, Professor of Anthropology, notes that above all, young people desired to play a role in the decisions that were affecting their lives – at Grinnell College, in the government, in the world. “This was a period when students at Grinnell and everywhere were demanding choices, that was the common denominator. We were complaining about required anything or constraints on our freedom,” says Andelson of the late 1960s. Throughout this process several solutions were proposed to solve what James Stauss, former dean of the college, called “the old lock step,” of the core-curriculum.

The open curriculum we know today was originally proposed by Beryl Clotfelter, Professor of Physics, in February of 1970. His report, “A Proposal that All Graduation Requirements be Abolished,” outlined a curriculum in which the only requirements for graduation would be the completion of 120 total credits and the completion of a major, with a limit to the amount of credits a student could take in a single division. After twelve long weeks of debate the report was rejected by the faculty,

citing the lack of structure and the difficulty it would pose for advisors as its major flaws. Later that spring, Barry Zigas '73, Jim Friend '73, Robert Meyer '72 and John Otto '71 formed the "Freshman Year Committee," in an effort to involve students more directly in the reform process.

Authorized by the faculty, these four students performed extensive research of similar "freshman year programs" at 37 other institutions in order to provide goals and guidelines for the new curriculum. The First Year Committee worked with Professor Alan Jones to transform Clotfelter's original proposal into a curriculum that would satisfy the faculty's needs by adding a "freshman tutorial" to Clotfelter's plan. Jones took this revised proposal to the faculty in the fall of 1970, and it was approved. In the spring of 1971, four pilot tutorials were conducted, and their success was an assurance that the system was ready for the coming school year. That fall, the Grinnell College class of 1975 participated in the first tutorials, 35 sections covering a wide range of topics and taught by professors from each division. The First-Year Committee made its final recommendations for the tutorial in the spring of 1972, and with that Grinnell's unique and vibrant history of learning continued down a new path.

Forty years have passed since those first tutorials were offered as an experiment, and the Tutorial today is a signature of Grinnell College. Countless hours of examining alternatives, revising plans, and convincing faculty, administrators, and students of the merits of the new system culminated in a new and better curriculum for Grinnell.

The Grinnell community praised the tutorial. Alan Jones called it a “pioneering adventure into free and open curricular territory.” Barry Zigas ’73, member of the First-Year Committee, commented that the tutorial fosters “close communication and exchange of ideas among tutors, between students and their tutors, and between faculty and the tutors who assisted them in their tutorials.” In the fall of 1996 the *Grinnell Magazine* noted that the new curriculum represented the ideals of the college, and was “infused with the independent spirit that marks Grinnell’s campus today.”

The tutorial was a success in many ways: advisor/advisee relationships improved greatly, as did faculty/student relationships. Students became more familiar and comfortable with the sources available to them in the library, writing, reading and research capabilities improved and the writing and reading labs were established. Students had more freedom and power to control their education, consistent with Grinnell’s commitment to self-governance.

Although the tutorial today may have changed a bit from its original inception, faculty still have the opportunity to teach topics of interest outside their primary field of study and students continue to enjoy the freedom to choose their classes rather than spend their first years at Grinnell bogged down by requirements. The informal character of the tutorial has changed; it is now held at a regular place and time every week, but it is still unique in its small class size and emphasis on inquiry, discussion, and informal written work.

Former Director of Academic Advising Jo Calhoun noted that the tutorial offers a smoother transition into college from high school. Alan Jones, in his 1999 report, stated that “the tutorial has continued to be a vital element of underclass learning at the college.”

Just as the tutorial is still shaping the way Grinnell students think, question and learn, Grinnell’s open curriculum still helps to define Grinnell as an institution. The open curriculum, now celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, has lasted longer than any curriculum in Grinnell College history, and for good reason.

Brooke Yoder ’12, curator