

Student Designed Proposal for Introduction to College Learning

by CHUCK L. GLICK
CHRIS R. MILLER
DAVID L. PHILLIPS

X 125, Residential Learning: Inquiry Into Theory and Practice, was offered during the 1975 fall semester at the Mens Residence Center-Living Learning Center, Indiana University, on the Bloomington campus. The Living Learning Center is a residential academic community established to promote three broad goals: (1) To house together motivated students, that is students curious about knowledge, committed enough to pursue it independently and interested in contributing to a community of scholars. (2) To help promote experimental and innovative techniques and courses of study at Indiana University, primarily within the LLC community, and (3) To develop student initiative in running a community by giving students an opportunity to have influence over an institution with guidance from capable administrators and faculty.

The course was designed by a committee of five undergraduate students, three first-year students and two second-year students. These students felt the LLC community to have greater potential than existed, for experimentation, for innovation, and for education. X125 was expected to 1) unify the community by giving freshmen a common experience 2) help the freshmen learn more about the potential of the living learning concept, 3) help students discover more about the current state of affairs at MRC-LLC, and 4) motivate students to bridge the gap between the ideal and reality. At present, the course has succeeded in informing the students of the potential and discussions indicated that there is a broader base of knowledgeable freshmen.

BACKGROUND DESCRIPTION

The idea of offering a course about "college learning" is not new. The University of Michigan offered a course in approaches to the institution and Ohio State still offers a course in the academic options of the university. Other schools have had similar programs, but most of these courses were offered to help students capitalize on existing institutions. The X125 course was intended to provide students with the incentive and ability to reform their own education and make the institution more responsive to their needs. Even this idea is not new. Beusleim, the late

experimental college at Fordham University, introduced their freshmen to a two week seminar in revolution before proceeding into the conquest of knowledge.

The X125 course, however, is unique. To our knowledge, no one else has ever tried to teach a college learning course on such a large scale and tried to encourage such a large group of students to take command of their education, while still endorsing the traditional elements of university structure: such as grades, classes, etc.

The X125 course was divided into three major parts. The first part dealt with the university as a whole, including history and mission, structure, design, corporate incentives, effects of college on the student, and finally, the drawbacks inherent in large multiversities. The second section dealt with the potential of the living learning concept, including a description of the general characteristics of LLC's as well as a discussion of the nature of intellectual community. The third part discussed the MRC-LLC and its options and present programs.

The course title (Residential Learning: Inquiry Into Theory and Practice) implied a cross between theory and practice. The course was set up by the planning committee to present the theoretical groundwork in three parts over an eight week period, and then allow the second eight weeks of the semester to be practical experience in the community. All students were required to formulate a project, a contribution to the MRC-LLC community which would incorporate an element of community, and symbolize some aspect of the integration of living and learning, or make some contribution toward solving one or more of the drawbacks to undergraduate education. Students submitted proposals by the end of the first eight weeks of class, and were expected to complete their projects by the end of the semester.

The planning committee divided the course into ten sessions involving students and instructors. Each session was divided further into lectures, reading assignments, and discussion in small groups. The committee suggested questions for lecturers to deal with, as well as discussion section questions. Further, the planning committee compiled a handbook of readings. This was a specially bound volume of 35 articles and essays cleared to be used

exclusively for this course.

After the final draft of the course proposal had been approved by the experimental curriculum committee, a group was formed to select the instructors from the MRC-LLC community. Twenty-five candidates were evaluated on their ability to lecture and their ability to elicit and guide a discussion. The committee then chose ten instructors and two alternates. Instructors were paid \$100 and participated in an intensive workshop to further develop competencies in leading a discussion.

The "outside" lecturers were professors chosen from the university community who had distinguished themselves in the area they presented. Discussion sessions, consisting of 12-15 students, followed each weekly lecture and were led by student instructors who had autonomy in structuring their own sessions. All instructors met at least once a week to share ideas and discuss concerns with the entire group. In addition to this regular weekly meeting, the instructors also met on the night of the class at dinner and often invited that night's lecturer to dine with them.

The course was given for one unit of credit and was graded on the traditional A to F scale. An essay exam was given in the last week of classes and oral examinations were required with the student's instructor. Grading was based on class participation and test scores.

DISCUSSION

The instructors of X125 felt this year that they failed to a certain degree. Student sentiment against the course ran high around the fifth week as the lectures became less and less relevant and the required readings appeared to be more than students were willing to take on. However, students and instructors also felt that the course was a valuable part of the community. It was felt that although the course was not ideal, the students and instructors had learned enough to justify trying it again.

The instructors felt that the course was aimed at a particular type of student. Many said they thought that students who had chosen majors or had had experience at IU or other universities got less out of the course than others. At the same time, these students also stood the most chance of getting a lot out of the course because they could use their experiences to evaluate the theory. It was felt that the course was offered too early for freshmen as it was before they could get their bearings and before they had any experience with the university to use in discussion or theory. On the other hand, all participants agreed that the course should be offered during the first semester or it would lose much of its value.

Throughout the course, disparity between the ideal lectures and the actual lectures was great. One problem stemmed from the fact that there weren't any experts planning the course. Through a little investigation, the committee determined what they needed to know and what they needed to cover. However, they couldn't tell the lecturers what concepts and ideas were related to the topic. Only the lecturer could make that decision as he was the expert and the authority. Unfortunately, each lecturer, like so many of the professors in higher education today, tried to mold the topic to fit their specialty. Often, there were topics which had no discipline to fit into and no specialized expert to have teach them. This tendency among the lecturers led to disjointed lectures and lack of course content continuity

and relevance. Additionally, very few lecturers read the material assigned to the students and so did not tie the readings into their lectures. Finally, the lecturers often had difficulty presenting material on the freshman level. They often had difficulty stepping out of their discipline to make it understandable to all people from different backgrounds.

The teaching staff was finally asked to weigh the rewards of the course experience against the costs. Most felt the pay inadequate for the time invested, but agreed that money was not a prime consideration. A valuable learning experience was cited by all as a large reward. Most of the group saw their activities as enriching their own education, yet feelings were mixed as to what or how much they had accomplished in the education of the class.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT PERSONNEL

Student personnel workers have asserted their interest in student development, however, their view of that development has oft-times been myopic. Experiments such as X125 offer a new area for student personnel involvement. Trained professionals are needed to work with students interested in taking control of their own education and to point out the avenues and assist the students when encountering roadblocks. Student personnel workers should not try to usurp the student's control but should serve as special spokespeople for such student development experiments.

One of the major problems we faced was with lecturers molding topics to fit their narrow specialties and by describing topics which had no discipline to fit into. If the older, more entrenched and conservative faculty that is forecast for the 1980's will not teach in these areas or step outside their narrow specialties, then personnel workers might be called upon to fill this most crucial void in student development. It is here that CSPA can perform a unique function in the future-if professionals in the field are interested enough to engage in background studies now.

CONCLUSION

While there were problems encountered with X125 it must be remembered that this experiment was designed and run totally by students' X125 was unique in concept and scope and is a valuable movement towards Kauffman's recommendation of the freshman year being viewed as an orientation to learning rather than the first year of academic instruction.

A course like X125, dealing with intellectual and experimental communities, should be offered at every institution. These institutions too often revolve around one man and are run by him. Too infrequently is the institution run by the students, and rarely is there enough student input given to help run the institution. The innovative experiments in America must overcome this one big problem: the institution's character cannot rest on one person. The university community itself must help determine the goals and activities of the educational community. X125 should be a component of every innovative institution in the country. We believe that the living-learning concept is transferable to other institutions. Our first trial year has yielded much valuable information.