

AD HOC BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Final Report

March 24, 1970

Introduction

The *ad hoc* Blue Ribbon Commission on Educational Reform was established February 6, 1970 by the Chancellor, the Provost, and the Steering Committee of the University Senate, in response to a proposal from Mr. John Springfield on behalf of "People for the People". Mr. Springfield proposed that the Commission be charged to "consider the need for major educational reforms, investigate possible alternatives to the present structures, survey the Oakland University community and .serve as a focal point for ideas concerning educational reform, investigate the feasibilities of proposed plans, and report back its recommendations to the university community no later than March 10 so that major educational changes can be instituted by September 1970". The Chancellor and Provost accepted this charge in a letter to the Commission, but pointed out that certain matters implicit in this charge fall within the jurisdiction either of the Academic Policy Committee or of the various college and school Committees on Instruction. The Commission was then charged to present its recommendations to the Steering Committee, either for referral to the appropriate committees or for referral to the Senate. The Commission began work immediately, and met approximately 12 hours per week for the subsequent five weeks.

The Commission recognized the magnitude of its charge, and is certainly aware that a month of deliberations cannot provide a complete set of blueprints for educational change at Oakland University. The Commission decided, however, not to try to continue meeting until such an enormous task could be completed, but rather to meet only until about March 10, and then to present a report of its views as they stood at that time. This report, then, is of necessity somewhat incomplete. It contains some recommendations for action, some suggestions for further study, and some general comments and impressions.

It is the hope of the Commission that as many of the recommendations as possible be studied and enacted this spring, and that the remainder of the report can serve as a catalyst for further thought and further action early next year.

Summary of Recommendations

The Commission has confined itself to undergraduate education, and has considered five major areas for study: the major requirements, the general education requirements, grading policies, the freshman year, and course offerings. In broad general terms, the recommendations are as follows:

I. The major requirements: The Concentration

A. Students should have the option of following a standard major program or concentration as published in the catalog or of constructing an independent concentration with the approval of an academic advisor and of the appropriate Committee on Instruction. The Commission recommends that the term "concentration" be used for all such programs to avoid distinction between departmental and interdisciplinary programs.

B. Departments and interdepartmental concentration committees acting in lieu of a department should offer at least one standard concentration in which the student has a wide range of choice in courses within the discipline and in cognate fields. This concentration should be offered in addition to whatever more highly structured and pre-professional programs they may wish to offer.

II. The general education requirements

A. The Commission recommends the abolition of the present distribution requirements in which courses in certain areas are prescribed for all students. This system should be replaced by one in which the student is obligated only to take eight courses (25% of his degree requirement) in areas of his own choosing, so long as they are outside the general area of his major or concentration.

E. Freshman exploratories and senior colloquia should be included in the eight course general education requirement. However, the letter designations for these courses should be abolished, so that they all fall by definition into the general education category.

III. Grading policies

A. The Commission strongly recommends the revision of the existing university grading system, in particular the elimination of the "supergrades" 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, but has not formulated a specific proposal for change. The Commission appeals to the Academic Policy Committee for a recommendation on this matter.

B. The Commission recommends the abolition of the 0.0 grade. Any student who registers for a course, and remains in it past the date upon which the final credit count is made, but who for any reason does not receive credit for the course, should receive an N grade.

C. The Commission recommends the establishment of an optional "satisfactory-no credit" system (S-N) for any student in any course. As at present some courses may at the discretion of the instructor be available only as S-N courses.

D. The transcript should show only those courses which the student presents for credit toward graduation.

IV. The freshman year

The Commission recommends that entering freshmen be encouraged to use the freshman year for exploration and experimentation. "Undecided" freshmen should not be counseled into a major but should be encouraged to remain undecided and to take courses in a number of different areas

in which they suspect their interests might lie. Freshmen should be encouraged to take most or all of their course work on an ungraded (S-N) basis.

V. Course offerings

None of the proposals offered by this Commission will have any significant effect unless there are basic changes in at least some of the course offerings of this university. No doubt some courses require the assimilation of a great many facts and others require the development of certain manipulative skills, but surely there is room in the university for many more courses in which the structure, methods and approaches of a discipline are examined. Brown University has created a number of such courses, called "modes of thought" courses. (These courses are described in more detail in an appendix to this report.) The Commission has been unable to formulate a specific plan for the implementation of such courses at Oakland University at this time, though it supports them in principle. The Commission does feel, however, that many of these ideas could be utilized more extensively in our present course offerings.

The Commission believes that most students generally like the freshman exploratories since for most freshmen they are the only guaranteed small course, and they are not tightly structured along disciplinary lines. (Some members of the Commission did question their effectiveness as a means of teaching writing, however.) A number of exploratory sections should be set aside for faculty who wish to use the "modes of thought" approach in the exploratory format.

More detailed descriptions of the proposals prescribed in I, II, and III, as well as several miscellaneous recommendations appear in the next section of this report.

More Detailed Recommendations

I. The Concentration

A. General

Although it is recognized that each college or school has primary responsibility to develop concentrations within its curriculum, the Commission recommends that:

1. The University Senate modify the degree requirement for the B.A. and B.S. degrees so that a student may graduate without a departmental major.
2. The University Senate endorse the principles concerning standard and independent concentrations described below, and refer them to the colleges and schools for implementation.

The Commission recommends that each student be required to present for graduation a concentration of related courses. These concentrations may be traditional majors, interdisciplinary programs, or may be devoted to the study of broad and significant general problems or questions. The concentration shall be not less than 32 credits nor more than 74 credits (25% and 60% of the total graduation requirement respectively). In no case should a department require more than 48 credits in departmental courses.

Each student should choose or be assigned a concentration adviser near the end of his freshman year. The adviser should assist the student in the planning of the concentration and the choice and scheduling of courses. The student may designate his concentration at any time after the freshman year, but he must obtain approval for his concentration before the beginning of his senior year.

A concentration as defined by the Special Committee on Educational Principles of Brown University is "An in-depth study centering on the unity provided by a discipline or disciplines, a problem or a theme, or a broad question... In concentration a student will be undertaking an extensive inquiry into an area which is significant to him." The Commission accepts this definition and recommends that the Committees on Instruction of the constituent colleges or schools be charged to oversee and evaluate proposed concentrations in the light of these points.

Concentrations may be either "standard" or "independent". A standard concentration is a concentration of courses prescribed in the University Catalog. Such concentrations have been approved by the appropriate Committee on Instruction before publication and require no further approval from that committee. An independent concentration is a related group of courses proposed by the student in consultation with his adviser and approved by the appropriate Committee on Instruction. Proposed concentrations, both standard and independent, shall be evaluated and approved by the appropriate Committee on Instruction. The Committee shall determine that the concentration is within the prescribed limits of size and that it meets the spirit of the above definition. The Committee shall approve a title or designation for each such concentration and this title shall appear on the transcript of each student, but not on the diploma.

B. The Independent Concentration

The Committees on Instruction should be charged to encourage genuine independence in the independent concentrations, subject to the standards described. Is the proposed independent concentration in fact an in-depth study; is adequate advanced work included? Is there unity? Are the courses proposed relevant to the disciplines or theme of the concentration? The significance of an independent concentration in general shall be accepted prima facie on the grounds that the student and the adviser assert that the program is significant. Only in cases of extreme irresponsibility shall the Committee disapprove in principle of the theme of a student's concentration. The Committee may require additions, deletions, or substitutions in the concentration as it deems appropriate; however, this power should be used only with great discretion and should not be routinely exercised by the Committee. Modifications in an approved independent concentration must be approved by the adviser and the Committee on Instruction.

The key to the success of the independent concentration lies in the relation between the student and the adviser. The Commission suggests that an adviser who advises any significant number of students pursuing independent concentrations be called a Preceptor, and that some device be developed whereby such a Preceptor undertakes his preceptorial duties as part of his normal teaching load. Similarly, students would also be given academic credit in general education areas for their work with the Preceptor.

Care must be taken that Independent Concentrations do not become a haven for drifters, a home for those unable to manage a standard concentration. Autonomy must not be equated with irresponsibility, nor freedom made synonymous with a lack of academic discipline.

C. The Standard Concentration

The Committees on Instruction should approach standard concentrations not with the intention of stamping out highly structured professional programs, but rather with the intention of guaranteeing the existence of at least one relatively flexible and unstructured program leading to the degree within each of the departmental areas of the university. A department or interdepartmental committee serving in lieu of a department may propose as many different standard concentrations as it chooses, subject to the limits previously described, but it must provide at least one standard concentration leading to the B.A. degree which contains not more than 40 credits in both departmental and corequisite courses, of which not more than 40 may be departmental, which can be completed in three years beginning in the sophomore year, and for which there are no restrictions on ungraded work.¹ Modifications in a standard concentration may be made with the approval of the advisor and the chairman of the department or the appropriate interdepartmental committee.

II. General Education

The Commission accepts the premise that a student should take not less than 25% (8 courses or 32 credits) of his college work in academic areas outside of the concentration. These eight courses shall include two freshman exploratories, one senior colloquium or four credits in University Forum, and five courses outside the concentration chosen in consultation with the student's adviser.

As a guideline for the determination of appropriate areas for general education courses, each student's concentration shall be assigned by the Committee on Instruction to one of the categories listed below.

1. Science -- Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Engineering.
2. Social Science -- Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology.
3. English, Foreign Language, Classics, Linguistics.
4. History, Philosophy.
5. Fine Arts: Art, Music.
6. Area Studies, and new interdisciplinary programs such as environmental studies.

Each student must then take at least five courses chosen from categories other than the one to which his concentration is assigned. When a student applies for inclusion on the graduation list,

he shall present to the registrar a form on which he clearly indicates the courses taken as part of his concentration and those taken as general education.

The system of letter designation of freshman exploratories and senior colloquia by categories should be discontinued. A student may elect any two exploratories and any senior colloquium or any four credits in University Forum to fulfill this requirement.

Since the concentration is limited to not more than 60% of a student's curriculum, and the general education program is 25%, the result is that each student shall have at his disposal not less than 15% (18 credits) of free electives.² Students whose concentrations are smaller than 60% will have a correspondingly greater number of free electives. Students waiving freshman exploratories by examinations or advanced placement will similarly receive a corresponding increase in free electives. These electives may be voluntarily used in the area of the concentration, in general education, toward a minor or even a second concentration, or in any other way the student chooses.

III. Grading Policy

A. Grades

1. Each course should be designated in the course schedule by the instructor or by the department in the case of multi-sectioned courses as available only on an ungraded "satisfactory-no credit" basis (S-N), or available on an optional graded or ungraded basis.
2. Prior to the final drop deadline, each student should indicate to the instructor of an optionally graded course whether or not he wishes to receive a grade.
3. At the end of the terra, the instructor should report either a grade or "satisfactory" (S) or "no credit" (N), as instructed earlier by the student. Graded students who do not pass the course should also receive the N grade.
4. The instructor should determine the standard required for an ungraded student to receive credit. The sole criterion should be that the quality of the work be acceptable to the instructor for credit toward graduation. In no case, however, should the standard be higher than that required for a graded student to obtain a grade of 2.0.
5. The Commission strongly recommends the revision of the existing university grading system, in particular the elimination of the "supergrades" 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3, but has not formulated a specific proposal for change. The Commission appeals to the Academic Policy Committee for a recommendation.

B. Term Reports and Transcript

1. The Term Report should be a complete record for the student, his or her adviser, and the accounting offices of all work for which the student was registered after the add deadline. It should be an internal document.

2. The Transcript should be a record of the student's academic work which he or she presents for credit toward graduation. It should not show courses for which the student was registered but did not obtain credit. The transcript should be available for external use at the request of the student.

C. Academic Standing

1. Since the possibility exists that some students will present a considerable amount of ungraded work for credit toward graduation, the grade point average will become an even less reliable gauge of academic accomplishment than it is at present. Therefore the specific requirements of certain prescribed grade point averages for "good standing" and the requirement of a 2.0 average for graduation should be abolished.

2. The sole criterion for good standing shall be "satisfactory progress toward a degree", as defined by the Academic Standing and Honors Committee. For students who take mostly graded work, the old g.p.a statement, can serve as useful guidelines; for other students, some such standard as 20% of graduation requirement passed per year could be used. (Obviously more thought and discussion are needed on this point.)

IV. MISCELLANEOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Prerequisites

The Commission recommends that the present structure of course prerequisites should be reviewed to eliminate unnecessary and arbitrary prerequisites. The term prerequisites should be used in the catalog only to indicate the most essential prior course work or training. Courses which are desirable but not essential should be so identified, rather than listed as prerequisites.

The Commission accepts with great reluctance the fact that for certain courses a system of prerequisites is at present necessary as an enrollment "traffic control" device. This should be viewed as a temporary stop-gap solution, however. Every effort should be made in the future to open enough sections of such courses to satisfy all student demand without the arbitrary use of the prerequisite system.

To implement these recommendations, the Commission recommends that the Committee on Instruction be charged to review all course prerequisites before their inclusion in the 1971-72 University Catalog. Departments should be asked to propose only those prerequisites which they are prepared to justify to the Committee.

B. Calendar

The Commission recommends:

1. The add deadline be delayed until the end of the 3rd week to permit a longer period for students to choose their courses.

2. The deadline for dropping a course with half-refund and the final deadline for dropping the course should coincide. The Commission recommends an 8 week deadline for both.

C. Independent Study and Group Independent Study

The Commission recommends that independent study be offered for credit to any regularly enrolled on-campus student who is able to obtain a faculty member's permission. The Commission recognizes, that faculty members may wish to limit their involvement in such courses, but feels that this is a matter for the faculty member and the student. The Commission sees no reason why departmental or administrative approval should be required, or for arbitrary department-wide grade-point average limitations. Similarly, group independent study programs should be arranged whenever a group or students obtains the consent of a faculty member.

Conclusion

The Commission found it impossible to agree upon a statement of a philosophy of education or upon a group of theoretical principles from which a set of specific recommendations could be derived. The Commission therefore took a more pragmatic approach; the recommendations, suggestions and comments in this report are those upon which there was substantial agreement among the members (for whatever reasons, principles, or philosophies). Not all members concur in all of the recommendations of the Commission.

Elmer Cooper	Josh Lerner
Bobbi Crakes	William Loafman
James Davis	Roger Marz
Tim Gerling	George Matthews
John Gibson	Michael Ray
Donald Hildum	David Shedlarz

APPENDIX

"MODES OF THOUGHT" COURSES AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

These points are taken from the report "Action by the Faculty of Brown University to establish a New Undergraduate Curriculum" dated May 1969.

1. The Modes of Thought course should place major emphasis on the methods, concepts and value systems required in approaching an understanding of a specific problem, topic or issue in a particular field of inquiry. The how and why of studying a given field should pervade the entire structure of the course. Facts must be considered as a point of departure in a course where the purpose is to create the spirit of a field and to spark the student's interest and capacity to deal with it meaningfully.

2. The particular subject in a given course, as limited or as broad as it may be, must always serve primarily as a vehicle for exploring modes of thought in the field of inquiry to which it belongs. By "field of inquiry" is meant a general category of scholarly activity such as Humanities, Social Studies, Natural Sciences or Formal Thought, that transcends departmental disciplines.
3. Modes of Thought courses include: a) the course which explores the modes of thought in a particular field of inquiry (Humanities, Social Studies, Natural Sciences, Formal Thought); b) the Inter-field course (e.g., Darwinism; World War II; Population Growth), designed to examine the relationship between modes of thought in two or more fields of inquiry. The inter-field course would be offered under one or more fields of inquiry as designated by the professor(s).
4. It being recognized that an atmosphere of excitement and interest is a most important factor in the learning process, the Modes of Thought course should be viewed as highly personal. It should have its justification for existence in the individuals serving as faculty and students. Accordingly, course subject matter and course structures should not be propagated from one year to the next; rather, a course should be offered only as long as a professor is willing to teach it and a sufficient number of students choose to enroll in it.
5. To ensure further this atmosphere of excitement and interest, the Modes of Thought course should be the focal point for lively experimentation, and innovative proposals for courses should be encouraged and supported enthusiastically.
6. The Modes of Thought course should not be a prerequisite for any advanced course. The danger exists that inappropriate pressures may be placed on the course to shape its directions in order to serve the purposes of advanced students. Accordingly, traditional "Survey" and "Service" courses are not appropriate for designation as Modes of Thought courses.
7. In the Modes of Thought course special emphasis should be placed on the "problem approach", in which a single problem might be viewed from several different perspectives by professors and students of differing academic backgrounds. Participating faculty should not divide the course into consecutive blocks of time whereby they phase in and out of teaching duties. Rather, the students in such courses should have direct contact with at least one faculty member throughout the course. The committee on Modes of Thought courses (to be described below) should encourage and support courses that are proposed by two or more professors working as a team. At the same time, it is recognized that many of the Modes of Thought courses will be taught by one professor working alone with the students.
8. Although lectures may form a necessary and desirable approach in the teaching of some Modes of Thought courses, in all cases there must be ample opportunity for discussions pursued in small groups of twenty or less. The more detailed mechanics of any particular course, however, will always be determined by the course itself and the individuals involved.
9. Along with the opportunity for discussions pursued in small groups, self-expression through written work should also be encouraged in a manner consistent with the aims of the specific course. Above all, the student should have direct access to detailed and constructive criticism of his writing efforts.

10. To create a relaxed atmosphere in which the student is able to explore fields of inquiry that might interest him, the Modes of Thought courses should always be graded on a "Satisfactory" basis (see IV, below) with qualitative statements made for individual performance. The qualitative statements prepared by the professor in consultation with the students will be used for counseling purposes.

11. The committee on Modes of Thought courses (see below) should encourage professors to use qualified undergraduates as teaching assistants to provide ancillary services beyond those possible by the professor. Active participation of undergraduate teaching assistants as tutors will not only enrich the experience of the advanced student but will also provide incentives for the entering freshman.

12. (a) The faculty should be encouraged to give, the students to take, and the administration to support Modes of Thought courses; (b) the program should be subject to continued scrutiny and change; and (c) the faculty and administration should be committed to implement this program to the fullest possible extent.

¹ The Commission recognizes that external legal and certification constraints may make this impossible for certain teacher education major-minor programs in the College of Arts and Science.

² Legal and certification agency constraints may make this impossible for students in some teacher education programs in the College of Arts and Sciences.