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Case Study #1 - Weservall University

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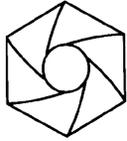
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New England Resource Center *for* Higher Education

Working Paper # 14

Case Study # 1-
Weservall University

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Fall 1991

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Abstract

In the collegial environment of a mid-sized urban University, faculty and administrators struggle with devising appropriate strategies for developing a set of general education requirements that can meet the multiple needs of a campus with a history of decentralized decision making. While some colleges vie with each other for increased enrollments, other units see general education as an opportunity to reinforce discipline specific goals; in addition, the perception of professional schools influences the ways in which the discussions and decision-making process are shaped.

Weservall University, a private institution located in a large metropolitan city in Rhode Island, has 8000 undergraduate students, most of whom are from the local region and the first in their family to attend college. The vast majority of students major in one of four professional degree programs--Business, Education, Health Services and Human Services-- offered by the University. Weservall employs 575 full-time and 400 adjunct faculty. A majority of full-time faculty have doctorates and were nationally recruited when the University began expanding in the early seventies. The part-time faculty have an assortment of degrees and teach many of the required introductory English and math courses.

From 1975-80, the institution had difficulty enrolling students and lost more than 20 per cent of its student body. Since Weservall is almost entirely tuition-dependent, the President, Barbara Key, reacted to the decline in enrollment by laying off 30 administrators and closing down the School of Fine Arts. To stem further decline, the President reorganized her senior level staff. In the summer of 1980, she hired a new Provost, Jack Merritt, whose last position was the Dean of a small liberal arts college in the mid-west.

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With the exception of a college-wide required Freshman writing course, general education requirements at Weservall University have always been the responsibility of the individual schools. In an interview with the Board of Trustees before being hired, the Provost said that he was not a proponent of decentralized general education programs because students majoring in the professions in such a system often receive too narrow an education.

In meetings with members of the faculty during his first semester at the University, the Provost found that most faculty expressed a willingness to consider a college-wide general education program. Pleased by this discovery, he described faculty reactions to the President and Chair of the Board of Trustees, Barry Sugarman. They encouraged him to use the opportunity to make bold changes in the general education curriculum, a move both believed would attract new students to the campus.

While faculty were interested in changing the way general education was taught at the University, their assessment was based upon very different points of view. Liberal Arts faculty were unhappy about the lack of liberal arts majors and wanted to find a way to increase their class enrollments and strengthen the role of liberal arts. Although there was less uniformity of view, most faculty attached to the professional schools wanted the general education curriculum to improve students' critical skills and focus on the professions.

Faculty were not the only ones with views about general education. Susan Honan, the Vice President for Administration, reacted to the rumor that there might be changes in the general education curriculum by sending the Provost a memo

urging him to use the opportunity to reduce course offerings, "downsize" the faculty and make needed cuts in the instructional budget.



In his first major action, the Provost appointed a faculty committee in the Spring of 1981 to recommend changes in general education requirements. The composition of the committee included one faculty member from each of the four professional schools and four faculty representatives from the School of Liberal Arts. The Provost appointed Eric Pizzoti, a nationally known scholar from the Philosophy Department, who had been on his search committee, as chair of the committee. He then asked the School Deans to recommend faculty members to fill the remaining slots on the committee.

The Provost's official charge to the committee contained three mandates: the recommendations had to be college-wide, coherent and require explicit general education content. After much debate, the committee members set an ambitious agenda which included discussing a common set of readings on general education, hiring an outside curriculum consultant and preparing position papers on a number of issues, including a philosophy of education at Weservall.

Eric Pizzoti was an excellent facilitator and the committee members enjoyed the meetings. But serious differences of opinion about the role of professional schools in general education and the value of required courses or areas of study emerged. Unable to develop recommendations that everyone could accept, but unwilling to disband without recommendations, the committee continued to meet for about three hours a week through the Spring, 1982 semester.

Unhappy about the committee's inability to reach consensus, the Provost met with the members at their last meeting of the semester and urged them to come up with recommendations by the beginning of the Fall term.

The committee members agreed to meet over the summer and, after two months of extensive debate and negotiation, drafted a set of recommendations for Weservall University. It included a required six-credit Freshman interdisciplinary course introducing the liberal arts and critical skills, writing across the curriculum, two required interdisciplinary courses in each of the four areas of study-- Humanities, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and the Arts--and a senior integrative seminar.

The committee sent its recommendations to the Provost who immediately sent them on to the Faculty Senate. The Senate spent most of the Fall semester debating the proposal and drafting a response. Elected members of the Senate, led by Peter Kramer of the Business School, were divided about the recommendations. Discussions in the Senate focused on the effect of the

recommendations on faculty workload, personnel decisions and accreditation requirements for the professional schools.

The Senate made substantial changes to the proposal. It left the recommendation to institute writing across the curriculum and the senior integrative seminar intact but eliminated the proposal for a required Freshman interdisciplinary course. The committee's recommendation that students take two interdisciplinary courses in each of the four areas of study was also "watered" down. While students would still take two courses in each of four areas of study, the governance body eliminated the requirement that the courses be interdisciplinary. Instead, it recommended that a special faculty committee be appointed with the power to designate which courses could be considered eligible for inclusion in the four areas of study.

Although disappointed with the results, the Provost preferred the Senate's recommendation to continued debate. In a memo to the community distributed the first week of the Spring, 1983 semester, he announced his acceptance of the Senate's recommendation. He acted quickly to set up a Core Committee which would have the power to approve courses in the four areas of study and act as an advisory group on general education policy. He decided that each school would have two representatives on the new committee and that the membership would be elected by all full-time faculty. He also decided to appoint Sarah Byrne, a young and energetic writing faculty member who was not part of any known faculty faction, as Chair of the Core.

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The Core was implemented in the Fall, 1983 semester. Byrne found the start-up more difficult than she imagined. While a small group of faculty from the liberal arts school were enthusiastic about the new general education requirements and volunteered to teach the senior integrative seminars, she was having difficulty getting professional school faculty involved in the seminars. To make matters worse, department chairs were reluctant to release faculty to teach the senior integrative seminars without additional compensation. She was also concerned about the process for approving general education courses in the designated areas of study: without a clear set of criteria on which to base its decisions, the discussion in the General Education Committee was mired in personality conflicts and arguments over guaranteeing seats in underenrolled classes. Byrne thought that inappropriate courses were getting approved.

In one of her regular meetings with the Provost, Byrne asked for help in dealing with these problems. He resisted her request that he attend General Education Committee meetings or get more involved in the Core's daily activities. Instead, he gave her \$20,000 from his own budget. Fourteen thousand dollars was to be used to compensate departments for released faculty and the remaining amount was for course development activities. After soliciting

proposals from the faculty, Byrne gave \$1500 summer stipends to four faculty to design interdisciplinary courses that could be taught in the designated areas of study.

Compensating departments made some chairs less reluctant to participate in the Core, although individual faculty members continued to resist efforts to recruit them. The initiative to introduce new, interdisciplinary general education courses failed, however, as the Core Committee met the next Fall and, voicing "grave" concerns about the quality of the syllabi, tabled the course proposals developed by the recipients of the stipends.

Student enrollment in the Fall of 1984 was smaller than in the previous years. The President responded to the drop in enrollment by cutting her Senior Staff's budget by ten per cent. The Provost adopted a number of cost-saving measures, including abolishing the practice of compensating departments for faculty who were released to teach in other programs. He reduced the Core budget to \$5000 for course development activities.

By the Fall, 1987 semester, there is a list of Core course offerings and the names of faculty who regularly teach to them. The procedures and policies for implementing the

Core are also in place. An advising handbook has been developed and will be available sometime during the semester.

Although the administrative details of the Core are now well-established, support for the Core's existence remains limited. On the plus side, faculty from the School of Liberal Arts continue to be strong advocates of the changes. But faculty from the professional schools remain unenthusiastic about the program. Wanting to reduce the number of general education credits required for graduation, a group of senior faculty from the professional schools are soliciting signatures for a petition proposing the elimination of the senior integrative seminar requirement.

Students have a mixed reaction to the Core. Some have told faculty that they like the requirements very much while others have said they are a distraction from their major studies. The Director of Admissions, newly hired at the University, has publicly stated that the Core discourages new applicants to the professional schools and advocates returning the responsibility of general education to the individual schools.

Increasingly preoccupied with the continued declines in enrollments and disillusioned with the Core's lack of impact, the Provost no longer meets regularly with the Core Chair or provides the General Education Program with funds for course development activities. Byrne left the University in July to take an administrative job at another university. The Assistant Provost has been appointed the acting Chair.

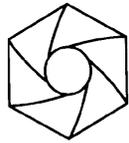
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Who are the key actors?
What went wrong?
What could have been done to improve the results?

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The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), founded in 1988, is dedicated to improving colleges and universities as workplaces, communities, and organizations. NERCHE addresses this issue through think tanks, research, consulting, professional development, and publications.