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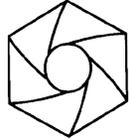
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New England Resource Center *for* Higher Education

Working Paper # 15

Case Study # 2
Littleton State University

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Fall 1991

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Abstract

A small public liberal arts institution receives word that its accreditation is in jeopardy. Though Littleton State is proud of its strong academic and professional majors and its recent institutional efforts to attract a new market of students, it must now decide the best way to examine its general education requirements or risk losing its accreditation. The case study outlines the process which the college follows in its efforts to maintain accreditation while still preserving its traditions and commitment to academic excellence. The case exemplifies the importance of examining possible internal risks as an institution responds to external pressures to change.

Littleton State College, a small public institution located in the White Mountains of northern New Hampshire, was founded in 1942. Originally a normal school to train public school teachers, the college expanded its mission in 1960 to include education in the liberal arts. Littleton quickly acquired a reputation as a good choice for students who wanted a low-cost liberal arts education in a beautiful setting. Admissions standards at the college were not particularly high, and intelligent but underachieving students from middle and upper class families in Massachusetts, New York and Connecticut flocked to the campus.

Enrollment at the college peaked at over 750 in 1975 and then started a slow decline. Two events accounted for this change. First, students entering college in the late 70's began to choose schools that offered professional degrees and career training over those that had an alternative lifestyle and the liberal arts. In addition, in 1980 the Chancellor of the University System in New Hampshire doubled the tuition for out- of state students attending public institutions, making public colleges expensive for non residents. By 1982, Littleton's enrollment had shrunk to less than 600 students.

A new president was appointed that year. Formerly Vice President for Admissions at a major Florida university, Larry Taylor put all his energies into increasing Littleton's applicant pool. To attract more local students to the campus, he got money from the chancellor of the system to start degree programs in forestry, human services, health sciences and business. He also successfully lobbied for capital funds to build a student center, an ice hockey rink and new faculty offices. By 1985, almost three-quarters of the students at Littleton came from the surrounding region.

An accreditation team from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) visited Littleton College in January 1986. While recommending that the college remain accredited, the team expressed serious concern about its general education program. They reported that virtually no one at Littleton could explain the rationale behind the general education program. In their view, the existing distribution system was loosely organized and lacked a conceptual rationale. Standards did not appear to be very rigorous. While praising other elements of the college, such as the strength of majors and the attractiveness of the campus, the team recommended that Littleton revise its general education curriculum.

In May 1986, the Commission voted to accredit Littleton for another five years and to return to the campus in 1991 to review its general education program. The president knew that the general education program had some problems. But NEASC's decision to return to campus in five years, rather than the usual ten year period, meant that the accrediting association had serious concerns about the quality of Littleton's program. Soon after being informed of the decision, he met with the dean of the college, Barry Steinitz. The president

told Steinitz that nothing was more important to Littleton than keeping its accreditation. Steinitz should consider general education to be his highest priority for the next two years.

Steinitz welcomed the challenge. Employed at Littleton since the early seventies, Steinitz was a professor of history and chair of the department before taking over the dean's position in 1984. He was one of the few faculty members who published regularly and had a national reputation in his field.

Steinitz returned to his office and invited his long-time friend, John Griffin, to lunch the next day. A faculty member in the English department, Griffin was very active in faculty governance. He had a special interest in curriculum matters and, for the last two years, had served as chair of the College Curriculum Committee.

At the lunch, the two men talked about their philosophies of education. Not surprisingly, they discovered that they agreed on many things. They decided to spend some time together over the summer working out the broad outlines of an ideal general education program.

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The Faculty Assembly reappointed Griffin as chair of the Curriculum Committee for the 1986~7 academic year. Five other people volunteered to serve on the committee with him. Four from the Business, History, Fine Arts and Political Science Departments had been at the college for less than four years. The fifth member, from the Education Department, had been at the college since the early sixties.

The president had written a memo to the campus describing the outcome of the NEASC visit soon after the decision had become official. Curriculum Committee members, therefore, were not surprised to hear the dean tell them at their first meeting of the semester that they needed to rethink the college's general education program. Griffin invited Steinitz to participate in the Curriculum Committee discussions on general education. Steinitz accepted the invitation.

The committee members quickly developed and distributed a questionnaire to faculty to explore their views on general education. Over seventy-five per cent responded to the survey. Most agreed that the current general education curriculum lacked focus and needed to be revised. Suggestions for change ranged from the very modest--a smaller, more focused distribution system-- to the very ambitious--a core curriculum modeled after the University of Chicago's program.

The committee met twice weekly to discuss how to deal with general education. The dean attended all the meetings, actively participating in the discussions. He encouraged the membership to be bold and innovative and "not to accept yesterday's solutions to tomorrow's problems." Students at Littleton had serious skill deficiencies and he wanted this to be the first priority of any general education program. Although not disagreeing with his assessment of students' skills, the newer faculty were more concerned about the content of the program. They argued that general education should teach students about the world that they would be living in. It should have a single theme-- like understanding the global community or respecting the environment.

The two positions easily merged into a single proposal. In late October, the committee distributed a one-page memo to the community, outlining its overall direction and asking for written comments. There were only two negative comments about the memo. By December, the committee had drafted a detailed proposal.

The committee proposed that students take one-third of their credits in general education, up from the current twenty-five per cent. It required students to take four courses in critical skills, including a two-semester freshman writing course and a two semester freshman seminar introducing the critical skills of observation and analysis. The remaining courses would address specific content. Two courses in the humanities and two courses in the social sciences would explore the rise of Western civilization. Two courses in the social sciences and two courses in the natural sciences would examine the relationship between the Western world and the global community. The final course was a senior seminar that would focus on individual moral responsibilities in the 21st Century.

The Curriculum Committee sponsored three open forums before Christmas to discuss the new proposal. Members of the committee also met with departments. The full proposal was also printed in the monthly faculty bulletin.

Only a few faculty members attended the open forums. At the department meetings, some long-time faculty members voiced reservations about the content of the program. But mostly, they had questions about how the program would affect teaching assignments and departmental responsibilities. Some said that the proposal would be too difficult to implement without financial assistance and asked about the administration's commitment to the program.

The Curriculum Committee met in January to share these concerns with the dean. He assured them that their design was both appropriate and realistic and could be implemented without the need for significant new

monies. He also reported that several foundations had already expressed interest in funding the proposal. The committee accepted his reassurances, made a few minor revisions, and distributed the revised draft to the faculty to discuss at the first Faculty Assembly of the second semester.

The chair of the Faculty Assembly was Priscilla Rudolph, a member of the Education Department. Steinitz told Rudolph that he wanted the faculty to act on the proposal by the end of the month so that he could start implementing the program in the fall. He needed the early start-up date to show NEASC that the college was indeed serious about solving its problems. She refused his request but instead offered to hold bi-weekly meetings to expedite the decision.

Griffin opened the Faculty Assembly by making an eloquent speech in favor of the proposal. Steinitz also talked about his support for the proposal and described how it would resolve the NEASC "problem" as well as put the college on the "national map." A few senior faculty members continued to speak out against the proposal. But the discussion lingered on the details. How would courses be approved for the program? Who would be required to teach? Would faculty be compensated for preparing new courses? The dean sympathized with their concerns. He told them that the college administration fully backed the proposal and had both the will and the funds to implement it. He could not say more: the issues they were raising could not be resolved until the final design was decided. He urged them to vote on the proposal so that it could be fully implemented in time for the NEASC visit.

By the end of February, participation in the faculty Assembly had diminished to less than one-fourth of the full-time faculty. At the first Faculty Assembly meeting in March, those present approved the proposal by a wide margin.

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Plans for implementing the new program started immediately. Steinitz decided to phase the program in, one year at a time, beginning in the fall. He selected Jerry Smith, a faculty member from the English Department, as the first director of the new general education program. Smith had been at the college for six years and was a strong supporter of the proposal. He was given a course release each semester to administer the program.

By agreement of the entire faculty, the Philosophy department became responsible for staffing the senior seminar and developing the seminar's syllabus. The English Department maintained control of the freshmen writing courses. The responsibility for overseeing upper-division general education courses remained with the departments. Although the Curriculum Committee would continue to approve all courses at the college, including general

education courses, departments decided which courses they would offer in a given semester.

Put in charge of the two-semester freshman seminar, Smith was expected to work directly with the faculty who volunteered (or were assigned by the dean, after negotiation with department chairs) to teach the first-year critical skills courses. He also was given responsibility for advising students about the program and evaluating transfer credit. Although he had no direct supervision over the upper-level courses, Smith periodically reviewed general education offerings with the dean who negotiated course schedules each semester with the department chairs. Smith was also given a small amount of money--less than \$2000 for faculty development activities.

Despite the dean's assurances, the implementation of the new program has not been smooth. The biggest problem is a lack of upper-level courses. Students complain that the available courses are often over-enrolled and that they have to delay their graduation to complete all the requirements. Many think of the program as a barrier to overcome and see little value in learning about the global community.

Faculty are angry that the promised faculty development funds never came through and that the dean expects them to develop new courses on top of their normal workload. They complain that many departments are short-handed and do not have enough faculty to teach general education courses. Many are now saying that they never supported the change; they were silent and stopped attending Faculty Assembly meetings because they feared retaliation by the dean if they publicly opposed the proposal.

To increase the number of general education offerings, the Curriculum Committee recently allowed two general education courses to count toward a major's requirements. This decision upset some supporters of the program. They fear that departments will now try to repackage old courses so that they meet the Curriculum Committee's approval process.

Littleton received a sizable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1990 to institute a series of co-curricular events that support the goals of the general education program. Steinitz is confident that a portion of the funds can be used to subsidize additional faculty development activities, including summer stipends for course development and foreign travel. He believes that these funds will encourage more faculty to offer general education courses.

NEASC knew about the problems surrounding the implementation of the general education revisions but was impressed by the administration's determination to solve them. Commending the college for its ambitious and

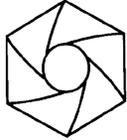
innovative general education program, the Commission recommended continued accreditation without further stipulations.

Faculty opinion about Steinitz is deeply divided. Many of the older faculty think that he has single-handedly destroyed the fabric of the college. Newer faculty credit him with making the college come alive. The president recently changed his title to provost and gave him a new five year contract.

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Was the dean an effective change agent?
What could he have done differently?
What is your assessment of the result?

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New England Resource Center *for* Higher Education

About The New England Resource Center for Higher Education

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.