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Case Study #3 - Mystic College

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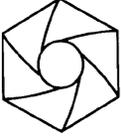
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Working Paper # 16

Case Study #3 -
Mystic College

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Abstract

In an effort to develop a more effective niche in a highly competitive higher education market, a tradition bound mid-sized private college known for its professional schools decides to overhaul its general education requirements. After formulating a bold curricular proposal, the institution is buffeted by the various demands and needs of campus politics and the inevitable challenges to tradition that such innovations bring. The proposal is subject to the contrary interpretations of policy and institutional history by board, faculty, and administration.

Mystic College, a medium-sized private institution located along the seacoast of Connecticut, was founded in 1892. Originally created to advance Christian ideals and values, the mission of Mystic has gradually changed over the last century to preparing students for professional careers. Rapid expansion of both the physical boundaries and educational facilities of Mystic marked the decade of the 1960s. During this period, Mystic organized schools of management, nursing, and teaching to go along with its liberal arts college. Master's level programs in clinical psychology, management, and engineering were instituted in the 1970s and 1980s. Currently, the campus has 4,500 undergraduate students, about three-fourths of whom are in professional fields of study. The faculty numbers 300.

A new president was appointed in 1984. Formerly vice president for academic affairs at Saymore College in New York, Emmanuella Taylor is a well-known Milton scholar. She also has served on the board of several higher education associations.

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Having been at Mystic for a year, Taylor felt that Mystic lacked educational focus and needed to develop an educational "niche" to attract more highly skilled students to the campus. She had recently served on a statewide commission that had recommended linking the amount of state financial aid available to a campus to the improvement of its academic programs. Although still a proposal, she wanted the college to be in a position to take advantage of the arrangement should it become policy. She saw the president's role in program improvement as largely symbolic. Through speeches and other public actions, it was her job to focus the community's attention on the need for academic change.

To begin the process, Taylor organized an ad hoc president's committee to study the college's academic programs. After consultation with the provost and school deans, she appointed seven people to serve on the committee. Five were faculty members from business, fine arts, philosophy, teacher education, and English. Two administrators -- the dean of the School of Liberal Arts and the registrar -- also served.

The president's ad hoc committee chose to focus its attention on Mystic's general education program. At the time, students had to take 36 credits of general education in four areas of study. Except for one required semester of writing composition, students had wide latitude in meeting the requirements. In the committee's view, the general education program was loosely organized and without a rationale. It recommended a major overhaul.

In a letter to the campus community in April, 1985, Taylor announced that she had asked the provost of the college, Bob DiCosta, to work with faculty members in responding to the ad hoc committee's recommendation.

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DiCosta welcomed the challenge. Employed for ten years as a faculty member in the history department, for four years as the dean of the School of Liberal Arts, and as provost for the last two years, DiCosta was thought by some to have presidential aspirations. In any case, he had wanted to change the general education program, and thought that the recommendations of the president's ad hoc committee could serve as an effective lever with faculty members and school deans.

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More faculty members were nominated than could be appointed to Mystic's 1985-86 curriculum committee. After a secret ballot, the Faculty Assembly appointed Barbara Murphy, a well-respected faculty member in the English department, as chair of the curriculum committee. Seven other people were appointed with her. Two from fine arts and philosophy had served on the president's ad hoc committee. The remaining members were from physics, sociology, business, mathematics, and romance languages.

Murphy readily agreed to the provost's request that she make general education reform her first priority. The curriculum committee begin the process by scheduling eight open forums, where departments and individual faculty members were encouraged to present ideas and proposals about general education. (Students were also invited to participate, but few did.) While the advice varied, the curriculum committee concluded that most faculty members wanted students to have an education that stressed moral issues and critical skills.

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The curriculum committee set forth four goals for the new general education program. The content of the curriculum would focus on the concerns and values of modern society and critical skills. There would be a common foundation of learning their last semester, seniors would spend time reflecting upon their educational experiences at Mystic.

The curriculum committee published the goals in the campus newspaper. Those faculty members and students who responded generally were positive. The president praised the goals in a letter to the campus community.

The curriculum committee continued to meet over the winter break to draft a detailed proposal. Murphy met with DiCosta and Susan Randolph, the chair of the Faculty Assembly, every other week to keep them informed. Several times during the semester, curriculum committee representatives sat down with

members of the Faculty Assembly and department chairs to get their reactions to various ideas. The curriculum committee representatives were surprised by the lack of interest on the part of some professional departments but heard few outright objections to their ideas.

The curriculum committee released its proposal in April, 1986. It was a bold change. General education was divided into four broad categories of learning: foundations of knowledge, world concerns, studies of individual and society, and service to others. Core courses with prescribed syllabi and common outcomes would constitute almost one-half of the general education program. The outline of the proposed requirements -- now totaling forty-two credit hours -- follows:

Foundations of Knowledge

Freshman Writing* (3)
Critical Reading and Thinking* (3)
Mathematics (3)
Laboratory Science (6)

World Concerns

Science for the Environment* (3)
History of World Struggles* (6)
Literature of Diversity* (3)

Studies of Individual and Society

Social Sciences (6)
Fine and Creative Arts (3)

Service to Others

Senior Seminar* (3)
Internship in Community Service (3)

*Core courses

To implement the changes, the curriculum committee recommended the appointment of a general education director and the formation of a core committee to oversee the program. One year should be devoted to developing courses. The program would be phased in, beginning in the Fall, 1988 semester.

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The president was very pleased with the curriculum committee's proposal. In a meeting with the provost, she suggested that he bring the proposal informally to the board of trustees' academic subcommittee to elicit its support for the new curriculum.

A thoughtful and effective member of the board of trustees, Edgar Braun remembers being surprised by the content of the proposal. The president of a major corporation in the region, Braun was chair of the board of trustee's academic subcommittee. He thought that the college's curriculum committee recommendations ignored Western tradition and were "faddish" and unwise. Several other members of the committee were equally critical of the proposal. One said he could not discern from the curriculum committee's proposal much connection between the recommended coursework and what he saw as the needs of the economy in which Mystic's graduates would need to find employment. Its strongest supporter was Marjorie Allingham, a wealthy donor who was head of public interest lobbying group in the state. In her view, the proposal directly addressed the need for students to understand and involve themselves in society's problems.

During an informational meeting, the subcommittee asked the provost a number of questions about the proposal but made no recommendations. DiCosta tried to defend the proposal as best he could. He promised a strong evaluation process to assess the educational effects of whatever changes were made.

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The curriculum committee sponsored three open forums in the Fall, 1986 semester to discuss the new proposal. Representatives of the curriculum committee also met with each department.

Several faculty members expressed an unwillingness to teach core courses. Other faculty members had a number of comments and questions about specific parts of the proposals. History faculty members were unhappy about the recommendation for a six credit core course in the "History of World Struggles." They would accept a one-semester core course on the subject but wanted the freedom to offer an array of history courses for the other three-credit history requirement. Science faculty members were divided about the required six credits of science. Some scientists (particularly biologists) wanted six credits of one lab science while scientists in less heavily enrolled departments, such as geology and chemistry, preferred that students take courses in two different science departments.

After much discussion, the curriculum committee decided to reduce the "History of World Struggles" to a three-credit course. Students would choose a second history course from a list of approved courses. The science requirement was clarified to require students to take courses in two different departments. No other academic changes were made to the proposal. At the provost's urging, the committee recommended that an evaluation process be put in place no later than one year after the program was fully implemented.

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Susan Randolph, the chair of the Faculty Assembly, opened the first meeting of the spring semester by making an eloquent speech in favor of the proposal. She applauded the openness of the process and argued that the design, if adopted, would put the college on the "national map." Murphy then outlined the details of the proposal. She stayed at the podium to answer questions.

Most faculty members supported the goals of the proposal. Questions put forth by participants addressed faculty workload and responsibilities: How would the courses be approved for the program? Who would teach in it? Would faculty members be required to teach core courses? Would they receive compensation for preparing new courses? Why weren't they given more details about how the program would be implemented?

Murphy said that she did not have all the details they wanted but would answer the questions as best as she could. The administration had agreed to phase in the program. Funding would be available for course development. The core committee would develop criteria for course approval. Faculty members would approve the criteria. Faculty members would be encouraged but not required to teach core courses.

Although not completely satisfied with the answers, few faculty members were willing to oppose the proposal. In March, the Faculty Assembly voted overwhelmingly to accept the changes. The provost arrived at the Assembly soon after the results and celebrated the decision with a champagne toast.

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DiCosta began meeting with members of the board of trustees to discuss the general education proposal. In conversations with board members, he stressed the faculty's commitment to the changes. The program would make the college a national leader in general education and attract growing numbers of socially and academically skilled students to the campus.

Although personally ambivalent, Braun did not want to oppose a program that apparently had such strong faculty backing. He agreed to vote for the proposal in the academic affairs subcommittee and to speak in favor of it at the full board meeting. After a short discussion, the board unanimously voted in favor of the general education program. The decision was announced by the chair of the board of trustees at the June, 1987 graduation ceremonies.

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By agreement of the Faculty Assembly, the English department became responsible for designing and staffing the "Freshman Writing," "Critical Reading and Thinking," and "Literature of Diversity" courses. The core committee developed goals and objectives for the remaining core courses. It also produced criteria to guide the committee in approving the other courses. The core committee sent its recommendations to the Faculty Assembly, where they were quickly accepted.

Interested faculty members were encouraged to develop new courses for the program. The president allocated more than \$40,000 for course development. Over 40 faculty members, including teams of faculty members designing the "Science for the Environment," "History of World Struggles," and "Senior Seminar" core courses, were awarded stipends to develop course syllabi. By the end of the Spring semester, the core committee had approved all the core courses and the teaching of more than 20 additional courses. Although the college considered a one-time four-week summer instructional development institute for teachers of core courses and the development of an attractive pamphlet for students that would explain the new program's purposes and design, these initiatives had to be abandoned for lack of additional funding.

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DiCosta gave responsibility for overseeing the general education program to Bonnie Epstein-Price, the Associate Provost. Epstein-Price was made an ex officio member of the core committee. She had, in her words, few "sticks or carrots" to work with in recruiting faculty to teach in the new program, but she did work very effectively with faculty who volunteered to teach core courses. She regularly reviewed general education offerings with the provost, who negotiated course schedules with the school deans.

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Despite the provost's early support and involvement, implementation of the new program has not been smooth. A growing number of faculty members who volunteered to teach core courses in the initial years are no longer teaching in the program. Some have decided it is too much work. Others chafe at using common syllabi. A few say that they are too busy teaching courses in their major to participate in the general education program. Epstein-Price's efforts to recruit new faculty members from outside the program have not been successful. School deans claim a lack of resources and balk at providing additional faculty members to teach general education courses. The program is being taught by increasing numbers of adjunct faculty members. The statewide commission ultimately rejected the proposal that would have linked financial assistance to program improvements, and resources continue to be scarce.

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In the Fall of 1991, Epstein-Price organized a series of focus group meetings with students who had taken general education courses. She learned that whether they liked the general education requirements depended, to a great extent, on the quality of teaching in the courses which, in their opinion, varied considerably. Some found the World Concerns core courses "preachy," but math and science courses -- which Mystic students previously had been able to avoid entirely -- had proven particularly unwelcome. Most students thought there were too many requirements. Few felt that they had been well advised on their general education options. Few saw any connection between their general education coursework and their career interests.

In December, DiCosta presented the president with what he described to her as a "bold initiative" to improve teaching in the general education program and "circumvent recalcitrant departments." It included funds to hire five new full-time faculty members to teach core courses. They would be promoted and receive tenure primarily on the basis of the quality of their teaching. He also proposed spending significant new monies to develop ongoing teaching programs to assist adjuncts and full-time faculty members with their instructional skills.

Taylor thought that DiCosta's proposal was imaginative and far reaching. She asked Braun and David Donne, chair of the board of trustees, to include DiCosta's initiative as part of the impending capital campaign. Braun still had difficulty with the idea of the core. While he was willing to "let the college have its curriculum," he could not support allocation of substantial new funds to implement the program. Donne said that it was a tough time to raise funds. The board already had too much on its plate and he did not feel comfortable supporting yet another spending plan.

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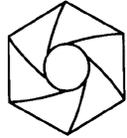
Campus opinion about the new general education program is deeply divided. Some faculty members think that the program is seriously flawed and, appeals only to a minority of faculty members and students. In their view, it never should have been adopted. Others sympathize with the criticisms but believe that the changes have enriched the College. While students continue to complain that the general education program is an inconvenience that limits their ability to take courses in their majors, many of the stronger students consider it one of the best features of a Mystic education. The admission office believes that the new program, which is now touted in admissions publications, may even be a factor in a slight improvement in the quality of student applications. But there is also evidence that more upperclass students are transferring out of the college.

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DiCosta left Mystic in the Spring of 1992 to become president of a similar institution in California. A new provost has just been selected. He says he is a strong supporter of general education but does not yet have enough information to express an opinion about the current program.

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