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GENERAL EDITORS

Vol. 62

# The College Curriculum

A READER

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Teaching and Learning Outside the Box at John Jay College of Criminal Justice

AMY S. GREEN

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There are not many college programs in which you would find such courses as Yourself: An Introduction; Revolutions, Rebellions and Turning Points in World History; Flesh for Sale: Human Trafficking from the Slave Trade to 21st-Century Sex Workers; and Lies and Truths in Private and Public offered by the same department in the same semester. The Interdisciplinary Studies Program (ISP) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice was able to do so in fall 2011, because all of its courses are team-taught by faculty from different disciplines who come together in rotating pairs, trios, and quartets to generate original course topics based on their common academic interests and a shared spirit of pedagogical innovation. In spring 2012, the roster included *The Politics of Liberation*; *So, You Think That's Funny*; *Ritual, Performance and Gender*; and *The Idea of Eternity*. For more than forty years, students and faculty at John Jay have had the option to take courses that delve deeply into issues, ideas, and information about a single topic from broader, interdisciplinary perspectives, rather than to pursue the standard, disciplinary curriculum. As chair of ISP since the fall of 2009, I am the inheritor and beneficiary of this academic feast. This is the story of its origins, workings, and future prospects.

### **Bold Experiments at a New Kind of College**

John Jay College of Criminal Justice was established by the City University of New York (CUNY) in 1964 in the wake of a national movement "to expand police education" and a desire within the NYPD to "upgrade and professionalize the force." The purpose of the new college was "the development of broad curricular interests in addition to police specialization and preparation for administration, patterned after the liberal arts curriculum." Most of the

students at the fledgling campus, first housed at the NYPD training academy, were in-service members of metropolitan law enforcement and public safety agencies. The founding faculty, who suddenly found themselves face to face with a legally armed student body, included both traditional academics and public safety professionals. In fact, the acting president during the formation of the College of Police Science was Police Commissioner Michael J. Murphy (Markowitz, 2008, pp. 7–9).

At the convocation ceremony for the new institution, Dean of Faculty Donald Riddle laid out the College's tri-part mission. In addition to educating the police force, the College would also strive to "define and develop the fields of police science and criminal justice into coherent and recognized academic disciplines" and "provide a strong liberal arts curriculum for its students" (Markowitz, 2008, p. 11). Still, given the curricular emphasis on criminal justice and the size of the fledgling institution, there was, and still remains, a tension between the professional and liberal arts branches. Course offerings in the liberal arts were necessarily limited, and the challenges of teaching a new brand of "non-traditional" students needed to be addressed. A handful of humanities faculty, led by Arthur Pfeffer (English), sought ways to expand the curriculum, vary their course loads, and experiment with pedagogical methods. Their brainchild, the Thematic Studies Program, was launched in 1972 with a half-million-dollar grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and matching funds from private foundations.

### An Alternative Curriculum: Thematic Studies, 1972–2005

Thematic Studies was designed to bring students together to study "a single theme of both contemporary relevance and historical importance to be taught by a multidisciplinary team" of faculty (Markowitz, 2008, p. 54). The grant envisioned an integrated curriculum that would foster reading, writing, speaking, and analytical skills across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Students did not major in Thematic Studies, but could apply the credits earned to fulfill requirements in general education to substitute for a limited number of courses in their majors and minors, or to serve as electives. Courses and students were divided into two levels, Theme A for freshman and Theme B for sophomores and above.

Courses at each level were grouped under broad themes that gave coherence and depth to the content and the student experience. Three course formats were available: Theme lectures were large sections with four multidisciplinary faculty members at the helm; interdisciplinary seminars were taught by two faculty members; and in disciplinary seminars the faculty flew solo. Depending on the annual theme and the faculty active in the program that year, "experimental" courses related to the themes were developed each semester as faculty teams came together in new configurations to coordinate the curriculum around the theme, select readings, design projects and assignments, and share the classroom. For example, when the theme was civil rights and civil liberties, a historian and a philosopher taught a course on the Bill of Rights; a philosopher and an English professor teamed up on *The Idea of Fairness*; and a drama professor and a political scientist did *Courtroom Dramas and Individual Rights*. In 2003, the theme was transactions, strife, and transformation; and courses included *World War II (History and Literature)* and *Patriotism, Nationalism, and Internationalism (Government and Literature)*. The concept reaped the benefits of both consistency—the four key academic skills were central to every course—and spontaneity, as ever-changing groupings of students and faculty encountered new ideas, texts, and challenges all the time.

Over time, as John Jay followed the national drift toward reliance on contingent faculty, that kind of intense planning and integration became more difficult. For better and worse, today's ISP courses cohere more through pedagogy than content. On the plus side, faculty have enormous leeway to teach whatever academic subjects they are involved with at the moment or whatever synergy they find with their partners as long as they can demonstrate at least a tangential connection to the annual theme. On the minus, reverberations among courses are weaker and sometimes hard to detect. We are working hard to strengthen the core of full-timers in order to revive that hub-and-spokes structure.

Long before "learning communities" were recognized in the early 1990s as a powerful tool to attach students to their chosen institutions, build social networks, and aid with retention, Thematic Studies courses revolved around the large-format theme lectures, which "served as the multidisciplinary centerpiece of the curriculum." The lecture was required for freshmen and optional for Theme B. In addition, Theme A students were required to select two additional, thematically related courses in the program each semester. In the fall semester, freshman courses were all about the individual and society. In the spring, the theme was individuals in conflict. In Theme B, students needed to take two courses, either the theme lecture and one additional course, or any two courses on the integrated program schedule.

The Theme A week began on Monday morning with the full complement of 125 first-year students in the theme lecture, which met as a whole for the first of a two-period session and broke out into recitation and discussion groups with a single professor/advisor in the second half. In the full-group session, the four professors gave short presentations and structured activities that showcased and highlighted the distinctions among their disciplines. For example, if the reading for the day was Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, a historian might discuss the period and context in Salem and the connections to the Cold War; a literature professor might ask students to analyze imagery and dramatic structure; a law professor would explore such legal concepts and dynamics within the play as perjury and self-incrimination; and a psychologist would talk about the characters' emotional complexities. Frequent guest speakers and panel discussions, performances, film screenings, and field trips were also central to the design of the course.

The brilliance of the original program design went beyond the innovative curriculum *per se*. The holistic approach to student success in Thematic Studies depended on the presence of a full-time counselor-coordinator whose primary responsibility was the progress and well-being of all 500 students. A choice was made to restrict registration in Thematic Studies by requiring the signature of the counselor-coordinator to insure that students understood what they were signing up for and how they could apply the credits toward their degrees. Billie Kordowitz was the first ISP counselor-coordinator. The program still presents annual memorial awards in her name to students who bring extraordinary effort and enthusiasm to their coursework. She set the standard that every student receives academic advising each semester *she* is in the program. Many also receive short-term counseling and/or referrals for longer-term interventions. And professors have a place to go when their students struggle. This may not sound like much to people in private colleges, but as the chronically underfunded campus of CUNY, John Jay has not had the resources to provide that kind of personal care and attention to the majority of its students. Fortunately, recent shifts in academic priorities have put resources into building an Advising Center for the general student population, but so far advisement is required only for freshmen and optional for incoming transfer students. No longer funded by an external

grant, our alternative model is costly, but its success has earned the continuing support of the College administration.

### Innovation and Longevity: The Interdisciplinary Studies Program, 2005–Present

ISP students write all the time: shorter and simpler tasks in Theme A, longer and more complex ones in Theme B. The labor of two or more professors enables quick turnaround of student work with frequent, formative feedback. Just as students might encounter related concepts or information in their courses, so too would they practice comprehending, comparing, and contrasting texts; developing and supporting arguments; synthesizing information; and concepts from multiple sources and disciplines; and relating what they learn to their own lives.

To everyone's surprise, Thematic Studies lasted far beyond the reach of its original funding and is still going strong today. In 2005, at the suggestion of incoming college president Jeremy Travis, Thematic Studies became the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, but the structure, curriculum, and pedagogical approach have remained largely the same. If the conjoining of literature, sociology, philosophy, and music in the same classroom were novel in the early 1970s, even more radical to higher education was the program's insistence that writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking were as vital to student achievement as content. In Freirean terms, the Thematic Studies faculty rejected the banking model of education, which envisions the task of the teacher as depositing knowledge into the student and the student to rack it up. They subscribed, instead, to John Dewey's notion that learning happens best in an interactive environment. Those progressive educational outlooks, surprisingly still controversial in some higher education circles, continue to inform ISP pedagogy.

Classes still meet once a week for a double period. The ISP classroom is an active learning environment. Tests, textbooks, and lectures are out; literature, primary documents, writing, speaking, and creative projects are in. It is a place where students read closely and analyze texts; write and reflect individually and in small groups; and debate, role-play, and rest their newfound insights in a supportive setting. As former chair, Professor of English Michael Blitz shared with me (when I first moved over from the Communication and Theater Arts Department) that the first task of the ISP professor is to "throw their minds," then keep challenging them with new ideas and tasks throughout the two-and-a-half-hour weekly session.

Teaching partners spend at least as much time planning individual class sessions as they do teaching them. The pedagogy is labor-intensive, but for those of us who get a kick out of watching students grapple with and grasp challenging material out loud and in writing, it is time and effort well-spent. Of course, over the years some faculty found that they resented the extra planning, coordinating, and grading, or did not like sharing the spotlight. One of the beauties of the structure is that faculty lines remain in their home departments, so no one is stuck in ISP Faculty members are free to go back to their home departments. Some newcomers seem skeptical of the core faculty's caution that our style of team-teaching requires more, rather than less, work than teaching alone. They may find themselves returning to their home departments sooner than they expect.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the ISP classroom is that it is more egalitarian than most. Because the professors leading the course are always exploring new territory, both in terms of their partner's disciplinary expertise and the topic, content, and course materials,

they are learning alongside their students. We frequently find ourselves asking each other to explain difficult points in a text or to put a given incident or artifact in context. Our willingness to ask the "dumb" question or float an unformed theory emboldens students to be more forthcoming. Perhaps the most valuable benefit for students of being in the classroom with two or more teachers is watching us disagree with our partners during class. When the professors argue, we model that academic discourse is fluid, that differences of perspective are valuable and constructive, and that complex and important questions are not subject to unambiguous solutions. I like to say that this is the right place for me because I was always the nerdy kid who loved school. I still enjoy being the proverbial eternal student.

Students new to the program can be put off by our willingness to let contradictions stand. Many of them seem to have been educated by memorizing and regurgitating facts, and they crave the security and rewards that come with getting the answer right. The ISP approach to critical thinking requires them to sit with a kaleidoscopic view, to tolerate ambiguity, and to delay the gratification of a "single-cause explanation of an event, topic or theme" in exchange for "a more enriched view of the issue, or topic at hand" (Wenworth and Davis, 2002, p. 17).

Changing the program's name from Thematic to Interdisciplinary Studies motivated the faculty to step back and reconsider what we do in light of new theory and research about interdisciplinary teaching and research. We spent a year reading and discussing what exactly interdisciplinary education is and whether or not that is what we do. Are our courses interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary, and what are considered best practices in the field? Wenworth and Davis claim that multidisciplinary classrooms involve "the sequential presentation of topics drawn from separate disciplines" and caution that such teaching does not "meet the aims of interdisciplinarity, which emphasizes conceptual and instructional integration" (p. 16). We realized that many of the John Jay majors are multidisciplinary. Students select courses from lists that include single-discipline offerings from different departments. Our Theme A Lecture, which emphasizes introductions to at least four disciplines, might, for example, fall into the multidisciplinary category; and some of our faculty, even in upper-level courses, prefer to maintain disciplinary distinctness. Their courses juxtapose materials and methodologies and mine the inevitable contradictions. An example of an upper-level course with a multidisciplinary structure might be *You Must Remember This: Memory, Mind, and Forgetfulness*, in which historian Andrea Balis and psychologist Sondra Lefkoff compared and contrasted the ways historians and psychologists think about and study the past.

William H. Newell and William J. Green define interdisciplinary studies "as inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights" (Wenworth and Davis, 2002, p. 17). Professor Abby Stein, herself an alumna of Thematic Studies, took the lead in this methodological investigation. In her view, "at the interdisciplinary level, you would start to combine the tools of disciplines, use fictional accounts to explore psychological data or, conversely, impose a psychological test like the MMPI [Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory] on a fictional character, or demonstrate how people are simultaneously biologically constituted and socially constructed even though that seems to be contradictory."

We were fortunate to host Michael Meeropol (a son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg) as a visiting professor in the last few years. Drawing on his academic, deeply personal experiences and extensive contacts, he created a course called *The Struggle for Justice: The 1950s*. Mike brought an A-list of guest speakers to campus, including Eric Foner, Noam Chomsky, Marilyn

Young, Peggy Seeger, and Tony Kushner. Students read their work and had the opportunity to interact with them as they explored the many dimensions of a period in American history that is often remembered as one of passivity and conformity. The following year, Professor Mecropol partnered with historian and long-time ISP faculty member Dennis Sherman to do a similarly structured interdisciplinary course on the 1960s. He will move on to the 1970s in spring 2013, this time with Distinguished Professor of History Gerald Markowitz.

Other teams aim for the transdisciplinary stance in which the disciplines are not displayed as discrete systems of knowledge and inquiry. Mech posits that “[t]he highest level of integrated study is transdisciplinarity, which is not of the disciplines at all. Transdisciplinarity means beyond the disciplines” (Kaufman, 2008, p. 31). Transdisciplinary teams start from the premise that neither the program learning goals for general education (reading, writing, speaking, critical thinking) nor the solutions to real-world problems are discipline-specific and that both are best developed through rigorous investigation of enduring questions through encounters with a wide range of art, literature, and scholarship. “In a successful transdisciplinary environment, the learner treats each of the various disciplines not simply as a place where specific subject matter is situated and organized... but as a way of reading the world from a unique perspective. When these different vantage points join in an exploration of any phenomenon, we begin to understand the phenomenon’s rich complexity” (Kaufman, 2008, p. 32). Given these superlatives, it is probably correct to say that we aspire to, rather than achieve, transdisciplinarity.

Professor Stein recently taught an upper-level course with Professor Balis called *Life after Death*. They designed the course around a case study of Henrietta Lacks, the African American woman whose cancer cells, harvested after her death and without the consent of her family in 1951, were used to start the most prolific and profitable line of stem cells for medical research. According to the syllabus, they used Lacks’s story as a platform for a wide-ranging exploration of “scientific and religious beliefs, medical ethics, public and private profit, and family ties within the context of twentieth century conceptions of race, class, and gender.”

In our transdisciplinary courses, materials and activities are selected to encourage Socratic interrogation, vigorous, evidence-based debate, and the construction of new knowledge. Professor of History Dennis Sherman reaches mostly in dyads with partners from English, philosophy, drama, and political science. Their courses are designed around such historical and cultural phenomena as world war, terrorism, revolution, or life-cycle events. Some of the materials and methods of study are drawn from the partner disciplines: but novels, poetry, plays, film, journalism, and the fine arts are likely to appear on the same syllabus. Selections are based on what is most likely to get students thinking, questioning, hypothesizing, arguing, and creating.

For example, in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, Dennis and I put together a course called *Revolutions, Rebellions, and Turning Points* for fall 2011. We laid the ground for studying revolutions in the modern world with a series of primary documents and secondary accounts of the French Revolution, including *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, and Robespierre’s speech to the National Convention of 1794. We also read and watched scenes from Peter Weiss’s 1964 *Marat/Sade* (*The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*). As a term project, students selected a Middle Eastern country in the midst of political upheaval and followed its progress over the course of the semester in Western and non-Western media. We compared the *Declaration of Rights* to the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*. Along the way, we took detours to other types of revolutions, including scientific and religious ones.

We read Brecht’s *Galileo* and wrote about the personal and ethical dilemmas of giving in to the demands of absolute authority. We also studied Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*.

“When we are really good, we abandon the [disciplinary] mindset,” says Professor Stein, “and, when we are really, really good, we transcend the theoretical boundaries entirely while still using the tools of each discipline as they have utility in illuminating an idea.” She admits, however, that, “Most of the time, we probably do end up in [an] interdisciplinary arena. We have not been trained to be transdisciplinary so it’s hard for us to get there, plus the disciplinary structure of the institution demands that students not throw out the concept entirely. It’s a compromise, like a transgender person who hasn’t had the surgery yet but hopes to one day.”

This transdisciplinary approach is sometimes looked at askance in an academy that cherishes its disciplinary silos. We have colleagues in other departments who think that, because ISP courses eschew the recognizable (if sometimes unwieldy) contours of the survey, chronological, or genre course for a kaleidoscopic view of the topic, that they lack academic rigor. In fact, we have heard ourselves disparaged as “hippie-dippy,” a moniker we carry with wry amusement. So, how and why has this vestige of 1970s alternative education survived for more than four decades?

Thematic Studies was one of several dozen funded curricular experiments in the early 1970s. It is one of very few, however, to survive forty years of curricular and institutional change. There are structural, administrative, and political as well as curricular reasons for its longevity. One of the most important factors keeping the program intact for so long is that it has attracted committed and creative faculty who never tire of inventing new ways to reach our evolving student body. Some faculty, such as historians Dennis Sherman and Gerald Markowitz, have been here almost since the program’s inception. They, along with such emeritus professors as Betsy Gitter (English) and Carol Groneman (history), provide guidance, institutional memory, and some of our best new ideas. Professor Gitter helped develop a pending NEH grant proposal for an “Integrated Humanities Project” that will ameliorate our students’ crowded and fragmented schedules by focusing in depth on a single capacious text in a pair of linked in-class and online courses. It is worth noting that the original NEH grant that started Thematic Studies would probably not be fundable today because it called explicitly for the integration of the humanities with social science, something toward which today’s NEH is not so open-minded.

Another factor in the program’s long life is the administrative support it has enjoyed through many administrations. (The one provost who wanted to shut us down lasted less than a year before he was dismissed.) Team teaching and a dedicated counselor are expensive, and we are the only campus unit that awards three credits to each of the professors on a team. Administrators have continued to provide the needed resources because they see ISP as a valuable resource for both students and faculty. They like offering students a viable alternative educational experience, and the program serves as an ongoing pedagogical laboratory for John Jay faculty. As we all know, few Ph.D. programs prepare us as teachers. Most of us follow the models set by our own professors, which often means lecture-and-test. ISP is a place where new or “state” faculty can see new models and create their own experiments. Most return to their regular teaching duties with new techniques to share with colleagues in their home departments. The opportunity to teach to one’s strengths and specialties is another benefit for faculty. And, fortunately, the majority of the John Jay administration believes that keeping the faculty fresh and happy is good for the institution.

For many years, ISP served a more public function in maintaining the academic reputation of John Jay College. During New York City's 1976 fiscal crisis, John Jay was threatened with closure. One part of the deal under which it was allowed to remain open was that the College abandon all but its criminal justice-related majors. This was the case until 2006, when the College was again allowed by CUNY to offer undergraduate majors in the liberal arts. In the meantime, the College maintained and routed the ISP program as a demonstration of continued commitment to the humanities, the liberal arts, and interdisciplinary education.

Student satisfaction and success is another contributor to ISP's longevity. The composition of today's John Jay College student body is very different from the one in attendance when Thematic Studies began in 1972. Early cohorts came to the College as working adults with at least postsecondary experience at an in-service training academy. Today's typical John Jay students are seventeen to twenty-four years old and are recent graduates of the New York City public schools. They are often unprepared for college-level work, and our pedagogy meets their needs. Participation in ISP is optional, but not competitive. It is not a selective group. Our students are all over the "academic ability" map. What they share is a willingness to engage with a stimulating environment and greater demands than they might encounter elsewhere in the College. We are always surprised at Grading Day when we learn that a student who gets Cs in our courses semester after semester keeps registering for our courses. Students tell us they know they could get higher grades but enjoy ISP classes more. They think that, in the long run, they will benefit more from the work they do here. In fact, many of our higher-achieving alumni go on to graduate and law schools.

We are always thrilled to hear directly from alumni what they find most valuable about the program. Here are a few recent, gratifying messages:

Taking ISP courses was the most enlightening experience I had at John Jay College. For the first time, I understood the importance of approaching a problem from the point of view of different sciences. I came out of the program with the critical thinking required of a college student. The flexibility of the program and the creativity of the professors made my time in ISP classrooms enjoyable. Since I had the freedom to choose the courses that interested me, never did I feel bored. (Michael Rosenberg, alumnus 1997, practicing attorney)

What I love most about ISP is how well prepared and confident you become in expressing your ideas and challenging norms. The personal experiences and perspectives that students and professors bring to the classroom make the process of learning even more involved and unique. Students of ISP often share meaningful relationships with their professors, creating both a collegial and family experience that is hard to find elsewhere in the College. (Newton Knowles, alumnus 2011, entering student at the University of California at Hastings Law School)

My first ISP courses taught me that it was perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, to root around in different disciplines while pursuing a common path. In fact, I realized a more vibrant world view, as I gazed through the different lenses of philosophy, history, drama, literature, and sociology. The class work was engaging, challenging, invigorating, and completely foreign to me from previous scholastic endeavors. (Heather McCowan, alumna 2010, master's degree candidate in dance education at New York University)

The final thing that has kept ISP going, ironically, has been a habit of lurking around the outskirts of the College's academic mainstream. The practice has kept us out of harm's way and allowed the program to self-regulate. Until now, all of our courses were considered experimental; they did not go through governance or get listed in the college bulletin. Instead,

we conduct robust internal curriculum approval and syllabus review every semester. Still, the shroud of mystery has led to misunderstandings among colleagues outside the program and perpetuated resentments about our supposedly privileged status. This will no longer be the case, as CUNY recently instituted a new university-wide general education curriculum that requires that all courses eligible for general education credit be registered and certified to meet specific learning outcomes (see Future Prospects, later).

Of course, there are problems and drawbacks to the ISP way. First, like most institutions of higher education, John Jay relies heavily on adjunct faculty. The program was started by a small and cohesive group of full-time faculty at the beginning of their academic careers and fired up by 1960s idealism. They threw themselves wholesale into cultivating new teaching methods and an evolving integrated curriculum as a contribution to social justice. Today's ISP faculty is a smaller core of full-timers, many of whom split their teaching loads between ISP and their home departments, and part-timers whose energies are even more diffused. According to Professor Emerita Gitter, the original faculty formed a "critical mass" who spent all of their time and teaching efforts in Thematic Studies. She believes that teaching has lost currency among many professors and recalls that teaching used to be a higher priority, in part because a rise in expectations for publication have made junior faculty wary of investing too much time and energy in the classroom. In her view, teaching is generally devalued in today's academy, and tenure-seeking professors fear that they have no choice but to put it lower on their list of priorities (Gitter, July 24, 2012).

The truth is that ISP faculty members are accomplished scholars. Some have published books and articles inspired by team-taught courses. Professor Markowitz and Marlene Parks (art history) used what they learned in a course called *The Art and Politics of the New Deal* (art history) and to write *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Temple University Press, 1984). Carol Groneman wrote *Nymphomaniac* (W. W. Norton, 2001) after team-teaching several courses on feminism and sexuality. Andrea Balis and Michael Aman are about to publish a pedagogical article about teaching race in *Teaching in Higher Education*. Other ISP professors credit their lively scholarly lives with our collegial and collaborative atmosphere. We talk shop a lot, use one another as sounding boards, and critique each other's work.

Lower interest in teaching and resistance from departments in sharing their full-time faculty make it difficult to attract and retain the kind of professors who built and maintain the program. Fortunately, John Jay Provost Jane Bowers is piloting a new incentive for departments to release faculty to us for a limited number of years or semesters. Carefully selected departments will be offered a substitute full-time line to compensate them for the teaching power loaned to us.

Because ISP is not a regular (i.e., tenure-granting) academic department, no faculty lines reside here. This is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, we are continually renewed by the arrivals and departures of new faces and ideas. Professors are not stuck with us or us with them. There are not rivalries and jealousies over tenure and promotion because those decisions are made in the home departments. We are not competing in the same disciplinary arenas. On the other hand, because participation on the ISP faculty is not contractual, we are vulnerable to the needs and whims of the home departments. Even if we think someone is or could be a great fit, there may be obstacles to getting him/her here or keeping him/her for any length of time.

A big part of my job is negotiating with other chairs for faculty loans and for the arrangements that enable students to apply our courses to their majors and minors.

In addition, we recognize that our approach can fall short when students substitute our courses for general education courses that also serve as gateways to majors (our introductory courses have equivalent course numbers). We know that students who have no intention of majoring in certain fields can get turned on to something and decide to change direction. In those cases, the lack of a survey introduction can be a handicap in upper-level classes. We are hoping that a silver lining to the new CUNY-wide general education cloud might be that students should be able to take the survey introductions in their major after completing an ISP course that changes their minds. Some students have trouble transferring ISP credits to other colleges that do not recognize our non-traditional syllabi as equivalent to the required courses at their campuses. We have reason to hope that the CUNY general education system will also take care of that problem.

### Future Prospects

The latest challenge to ISP is the imposition by the central CUNY administration of its common general education program for all eighteen undergraduate degree-granting campuses. The Chancellor's justification for this top-down takeover of the curriculum is that common requirements will solve the problem of transferring credits and fulfilling general education requirements when students move from campus to campus. According to the 2010 report *Impoving Student Transfer at CUNY*, which laid out the problem to which Pathways is supposedly the solution, some 11,000 students transferred into or among CUNY colleges in fall 2009. The report claims that the only way to prevent precious credits from being forfeited in such moves is to have a single, CUNY-wide general education curriculum and that it be limited to no more than thirty credits for associate degrees and forty-two for baccalaureate degrees. Strong opposition was immediate from the University Faculty Senate and the Professional Staff Congress (the CUNY faculty union), who are now suing for breach of governance and working on alternate fixes. But the CUNY Board of Trustees' endorsement of Pathways is unlikely to be reversed.

The Pathways curriculum is comprised of a thirty-credit, outcomes-based common core, with a college option to offer twelve additional credits on campuses that offer bachelor's degrees. Ironically, since 2002, at CUNY's urging, most campuses have gone through extensive general education reform processes—some with award-winning results, as at Brooklyn College, whose core curriculum is recognized nationally. Coincidentally (or maybe it was more than coincidence, given Provost Bowers' fondness for interdisciplinary curricula), I chaired the general education reform process at John Jay. In May 2011, after four years of sometimes-heated campus debate, we adopted an outcomes-based, mission-specific general education curriculum. The CUNY Board of Trustees voted to impose a university-wide program in June. Fortunately, Undergraduate Dean Anne Lopes, who was instrumental in moving the John Jay proposal through governance, was appointed to the Pathways Task Force and influenced the design of the new curriculum, which has some features in common with ours. Considering that I led its development, it was not unexpected that the one we adopted right before the changes was going to be a good fit for ISP. We can deal with Pathways. In fact, we are able to offer up to thirty-six of the forty-two credits.

Still, it is no surprise that CUNY faculty are up in arms. Their objections are two-fold. First, there is widespread outrage that the Chancellor and Board of Trustees have violated traditional and fiercely held faculty prerogative. This is a legitimate complaint and the Professional Staff Congress has filed a lawsuit to stop the implementation of Pathways. There is less unanimity about the second major objection, that is, that the Pathways curriculum be built around learning outcomes.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities promotes learning outcomes-based curricula, and many have been implemented at both public and private institutions around the country, but they arouse suspicion and resentment among faculty who calculate the value of a college education by how many courses in which disciplines students are required to take. Pathways does not mandate general education courses in specific disciplines, but rather that courses from a wide range of disciplines meet the required outcomes in five areas of the curriculum (World Culture and Global Issues; U.S. Experience in Its Diversity; The Individual and Society; Creative Expression; and The Scientific World). General education courses now have to be registered with a centralized clearinghouse so that any course a student passes at one CUNY campus will be accepted and credited toward the same requirement when *s/he* transfers.

For ISP, whose curriculum has always cohered around developing core academic skills, learning outcomes are nothing new. Disciplinary coverage is not the goal; building skills, developing curiosity, confidence, intellectual capacity, and life-long learning habits are more paramount. Our objections to the imposed curriculum were less about its outcomes-based structure and more about whether or not the curricular categories would constrain our ability to generate innovative courses without content limitations. Our other challenge is administrative. Because the curriculum is constantly changing, ISP courses, which are most frequently used to fulfill general education requirements, have always been considered experimental and are never required to go through the college curriculum committee. The new system requires that to be accepted for general education credit, every course must be approved through both campus governance and the University clearinghouse.

Because we had never passed through the course-approval gauntlet before, and because we were aware of resentment and doubt about our program (we are the only campus unit where teaching partners both get full credit for teaching a single course), the ISP faculty feared that this could be the end of the line for a program that thrives on curricular and pedagogical flexibility. The last thing we want is to be tied down to offering the exact same courses year after year. The ISP curriculum committee spent most of spring 2012 struggling with how to meet the new mandate without clearing the banquet table.

We tackled the problem by sifting through dozens of syllabi for ISP courses that had been offered in the past five years and sorting them into roughly thematic piles. We identified such clusters that seemed to ally with the Pathways categories. We then created master course titles and proposals that we believe will satisfy the requirements and still accommodate a wide variety of topics, approaches, and disciplinary combinations. For example, a course called *Remembering and Forgetting* might be about biography and autobiography in one semester, about the impact of childhood trauma in another, and about the construction of history in a third. A course called *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Revenge* was inspired by existing syllabi focused on vigilantism, comparative religious approaches to justice, and the practical and ethical implications of the death penalty. *American Identities* should accommodate everything from the immigrant experience to the Stonewall riots.



Another irony in all of this is that, while the other departments who played by the rules all these years have to revise or come up with a handful of courses to stay active in the newly opened general education marketplace, we are scrambling to put twenty new courses in the pipeline by September in order for them to get Pathways certified in time to be offered when the new curriculum becomes mandatory for incoming students in September 2013. Fortunately, faculty members were willing to hold their noses at complying with the University mandate in order to keep the program viable and are busy developing proposals as I write. Once again, I have been tapped to chair the committee that will vet Pathways proposals at John Jay and recommend them for approval by the Undergraduate Curriculum and Standards Committee. I will be supported by Thematic Studies/ISP veteran Betsy Gitter.

Beyond this existential moment, once the Pathways crisis is over, we are hoping to develop more formal curricular structures to incentivize students to stay with us longer and provide opportunities to reinforce the integrated curriculum. We are considering options for a minor in interdisciplinary studies, American studies, or cultural studies and hoping that a successful minor will become a platform for a program major. The provost envisions a division of interdisciplinary studies some day that would bring ISP and such interdisciplinary majors as gender studies, humanities and justice studies, and international criminal justice under a single umbrella.

For now, we are rolling out a new freshman common experience course to replace the old Theme A lecture. It will expose students to a wider range of disciplines in a single semester, but in a smaller and less intimidating environment. Instead of meeting as a group of 100 every week, students will be divided into classes of thirty to thirty-five, and faculty from six disciplines will rotate in pairs at three-week intervals. The three sections will come together four times during the term for field trips and special events, culminating in a showcase of their research projects. In many ways, this new twist on the ISP curriculum also harkens back to the program's origins. Professor and Deputy Chair Richard Haw brought together a team of six professors who collaborated on a new approach and designed a syllabus called Justice and the Individual: Who's In and Who's Out? Separate units on environmental, educational, and legal justice will introduce students to the many forms and institutions of justice as well as to the disciplines of English, psychology, media studies, law, ethnic studies, and sociology. They are planning a day trip to the ruins of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Thematic Studies freshman used to go there every year. The spiral of tradition and innovation continues. The feast moves on.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

# "Connecting the Classroom to the World"

An Integrative, Interdisciplinary, and Experiential Approach to Learning at George Mason University<sup>1</sup>

LISA GRING-PEMBLE

New Century College is committed to integrating interdisciplinary knowledge with lifelong learning by offering experiential, hands-on learning that connects the classroom to the world. Our community encourages students to engage in active learning, independent inquiry, and research that respond to the needs and opportunities of a diverse society while preparing them for responsible leadership and citizenship. (New Century College Mission Statement)

Alan Mersten's sixteen-year run as Mason's omnipresent president ends June 30, 2012. . . . [Mersten] might best be remembered for transforming Mason from a local school with a "commuter college" reputation into a nationally known brand. . . . Since Mersten took the reins in 1996, Mason has gone from a commuter to residential campus. . . . The number of on-campus facilities rose from 125 to 168, and enrollment increased from 24,200 to 33,300. Faculty and staff more than doubled, from 4,400 to 9,600. . . . Research funding at Mason rose from \$30 million to \$130 million. . . . [and] Mason's overall budget has gone from \$220 million in 1996 to \$880 million today. (Hobbs, *Washington Post*, May 30, 2012)

\$1.7-trillion in student debt—and the worst job market in years.

12th—Rank of United States in college degrees held by 25- to 34-year-olds. Down from No. 1.

Increase in number of new students enrolled in for-profit colleges—2369%.  
41 million—Visitors to the Khan Academy over the last 18 months.

160k—Participants in Prof. Sebastian Thrun's free TED-Ed course on artificial intelligence.

INNOVATE YOUR WAY OUT OF THAT? (*The Chronicle Review*, Headline, April 13, 2012)

In the early 1990s, a small leadership group representing the ideas of over 100 George Mason University faculty and staff from a variety of disciplines designed a competency-based, two-year pilot program that would become New Century College (NCC). Founding New Century College Dean and Professor John O'Connor remembers the initial pilot program planning stages when faculty and staff surveyed best practices in innovative colleges and universities (for example, learning communities, service-learning, competency-based education, self-regulated