



BILL BURKHART

CSS & COL

LOOKING GOOD AT 40

Founded as radical experiments in pedagogy, the College of Social Studies and the College of Letters foreshadowed the rise of interdisciplinary studies and led to fundamental curricular and social changes that are with us today.

Carlo Boehm '01 and Hanna Ingber '03 show why students in the College of Social Studies read a lot.

The College of Letters celebrated its 40th anniversary September 22–23 with a gathering of faculty and alumni who reminisced about their past experiences in the program. William Blakemore '65, a correspondent for ABC News, was among the speakers. He recalled a cold January morning 37 years ago when he and a dozen or so fellow COL sophomores sailed past the partially built Verrazano Narrows Bridge on their way to a semester abroad.

The voyage then took a week and seemed like a large step into the unknown. “Today, it’s an overnight on a packed jet airliner, and less and less likely to be the first trip to Europe for the kids,” Blakemore related. “And when they get there now, communications home are not—as they were with us—either a very expensive phone call for which you waited hours while the operator tried to get through—or a long lonely trek to the American Express *poste restante* in some city on the odd chance that someone had sent you a card or letter on the off chance you might stop by there—or, in extreme emergency, some sort of telegram. Today it’s a phone call on the pocket cell phone.”

Blakemore was an early participant in the then-experimental College of Letters, which was part of the College Plan, with its cousins, the College of Social Studies and the short-lived College of Quantitative Studies. The plan was launched in 1959 as part of an ambitious but controversial effort to remake Wesleyan along the lines of interdisciplinary colleges. At the time, the Carnegie Foundation praised the plan as “one of the most imaginative” initiatives in higher education. *Time* magazine in 1960 called it “this year’s shrewdest innovation in independent study.” President Victor Butterfield never realized the full scope of his dreams for the plan, as Wesleyan turned instead toward the development of graduate programs, but he and faculty colleagues did anticipate the importance of interdisciplinary studies.

Today, “all interesting work is done interdisciplinarily,” asserts Herbert Arnold, one of the senior members of the

COL faculty and professor of German studies. From American studies to women’s studies, the growth of interdisciplinary scholarship throughout higher education is evident in formal degree programs and in less formal collaborations among individual faculty. By that measure the COL and CSS have succeeded so well that they now represent the status quo. Once radical in their experimentalism, the colleges are now viewed as offering a time-honored approach.

“The CSS provides a very distinctive education that encourages students to reflect on what it means to learn things,” says Professor of History and CSS Tutor David Morgan. “But the college was not trendy when it was founded and is anything but trendy now. The most common criticism you hear about the both the CSS and the COL is that they are old-fashioned in the way they approach their subject matter. That doesn’t bother me at all.”

Professor of Philosophy and CSS Tutor Brian Fay reflected on the interdisciplinary approach that has distinguished the CSS and COL and is now pervasive. “Post-modernism, cultural studies, women’s studies—all that has transformed the disciplines,” he says. “Our program looks a bit like meat and potatoes.”

The program is surely a substantial plate of meat and potatoes. Sophomores confront a hefty reading list of original texts ranging from Hobbes and Locke to Marx and Keynes. Juniors focus on international politics and international economics, while the senior seminar is devoted to democracy. Tav Nyong’o ’95, writing in an issue of the CSS newsletter, observed that the readings in various sophomore tutorials are not all as traditional as is sometimes claimed; class and gender issues and “even a tantalizing hint of postmodernism” can be found.

“It’s intense, demanding,” says Fay. “You can tell a CSS class. The students are lively, willing to engage material, to bring in stuff from the outside. I can see students bring things together every week in my class. It has an impact on their writing ability, their ability to think on their feet, to interact with one another, to integrate.”

One such class—one of the essential sophomore year tutorials, led by Associate Professor of History and CSS Tutor Cecilia Miller—met in September on a Friday afternoon (hardly a popular time for classes). A warm late-summer breeze stirred the air of a seminar room on the top floor of the Public Affairs Center. Far from dozing off, though, 10 CSS sophomores were giving Miller their utmost attention. She, in turn, called on one person after another in rapid succession as they discussed the condition of workers in late 18th- and early 19th-century Britain.

“What’s the evidence that poverty was widespread among workers, so much so that a general crisis condition existed?” she asked. One student cited filthy living conditions, but Miller pointed out that cleanliness is a modern cultural bias and that Renaissance aristocrats lived in con-

ditions we would consider appalling. Another student got a favorable nod for mentioning statistics such as mortality and unemployment rates among the poor.

Students have nowhere to hide in this class, and no one escapes without having to defend his or her views before peers and professor. The interchange represents, perhaps, a pure form of liberal arts education—students deepening their understanding and ability to articulate under the close tutelage of a faculty member.

“Being in CSS definitely means learning for the sake of learning,” says Hanna Ingber ’03. “We’re not graded, but we cram for quizzes in our social theory class, and we all show up for the weekly review sessions.”

Ingber admits the intense workload brought tears during the first week, but they quickly stopped. “The CSS teaches you time management, that you can’t procrastinate. You have to commit yourself and focus completely. It’s good to know that you have the willpower to stay in the library till midnight when you don’t have class the next day.”

“I was surprised by how involved the professors are, how well they know their students” says Carlo Boehm ’01, who chose the CSS for its emphasis on writing.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Garrow ’75 also praised the writing component of the CSS program. “... it wasn’t the particulars or content of what we did in CSS that has had such a huge impact on me, but the amount and intensiveness of the writing,” he said in an issue of the newsletter. “I think the weekly papers are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

At the COL anniversary celebration, participants recalled and relived the program’s exciting atmosphere. Seth Davis ’72 says, “The talk flowed for hours from present and past faculty, and from students of four different decades. We came away reaffirmed in our ties to a program that was, and still is, unique. The common threads of grandiose ideas, mountainous reading lists, fending for one’s self in Europe, conquering the comprehensive exam and senior thesis applied through the years.”

Davis recalls a moment at the COL chessboard during his undergraduate days that underscores the importance of interactions outside the classroom. He was on the verge of beating Manfred Stassen, a German former COL professor. “‘Ach, Mr. Davis,’ he groaned. ‘You now have a chance of beating me,’” Davis relates. “And beat him I did—the first of only three such victories, none of which Stassen now claims to remember. As I triumphantly strode across Lawn Avenue, one of my friends mistook my great glee as the sign of a recent sexual conquest. Better than that, I told him. I beat Stassen in chess. ‘That is better,’ he admitted.”

From the outset, an anchor of the COL program has

been the requirement to study abroad. Blakemore called it “the famous Sea Change we’d learned about in Hamlet,” a “deep alienation of important culture shock.”

According to Arnold, the experience forces students “into acquiring a multicultural perspective of a serious sort, a really ‘other’ culture. For that they need to operate in another language. They become different people; they think differently in another language. Once over there, they grow up much faster than they possibly can at Wesleyan. They experience a crucial perspectival change that allows them to see themselves, for the first time, as Americans.”

Students are expected to be bilingual when they return, and able, in their last two years, to do advanced work in the language and culture studied. Faculty believe their students acquire greater worldliness and independence.

The COL continues to use team-teaching, but to a more limited extent than in the past. Alen Hamza ’02 believes this approach “makes the disciplines seem not as frighten-

ing.” Faculty in the COL say one of the finest aspects of their program—one consistently praised by alumni—is the opportunity for participants to get to know one another over several years. The same applies to the CSS. Discussion of texts read in common, a sociable process of learning, the colloquium format—all contribute to what faculty describe as a genuine intellectual community.

Faculty in the COL and CSS express considerable pride in the high number of prizes and honors that go to their students and in their success after graduation. Federal judges and ambassadors from the CSS, noted journalists and academics from the COL are among individuals (faculty cite many others) whose achievements contribute to the luster of the programs. Participants of the COL symposium, for instance, discussed a variety of topics in education with fellow COL graduate Ethan Bronner ’76, education editor of *The New York Times*.

Federal Appellate Judge Andrew Kleinfeld, a 1966 grad-

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uate of the CSS, expounded upon his CSS-instilled skills by noting that the value of his education was “incomparably great—I mean ‘incomparably’ literally.

“There is an expectation in my COL classes that students will have more responsibility for taking charge of the class,” he adds. “We’ve had much more fruitful and engaging discussions than in other classes outside the program. We’re encouraged not to rely so much on the professors.”

Both the COL and the CSS remain oriented toward the classics in the Western tradition, but have adapted their curricula over time. In the COL, electives such as Women, Sociability and Solitude or Modernity, Gender, and War supplement the more classical offerings. The curricula of the CSS sophomore tutorials now are jointly planned and genuinely integrated in a way they were not prior to 1988. The programs initially both required junior-year comprehensives administered by external examiners, but eventually reached different conclusions about their utility, with COL retaining them, but not CSS.

During the past 40 years, the CSS and COL underwent one major structural change when they gradually ceased to be residential colleges—a process mostly completed by 1980. Curricula have changed and other refinements have been adopted, but the educational framework has stayed remarkably constant. They remain three-year programs focused on intensive reading of texts and discussion-based colloquia in which grades are downplayed. Year after year, for example, sophomores in the CSS write five-page papers every week for 27 weeks, a gauntlet that spawned the sobriquet, “College of Suicidal Sophomores.”

“I use my CSS education frequently,” he added. “I have, for example, recently written two decisions, one on price discrimination and another on environmental pollution, and both used material I learned in Louis Mink’s philosophy colloquium. My law clerks, despite tremendous educational achievements, rarely can help me in this kind of contextual thinking because their educations just aren’t general enough. Life is more fun, and I like to think that the population of the Ninth Circuit suffers fewer Kleinfeld errors than they would otherwise because of my CSS education.”

Both programs, in the words of Arnold, are “operating on one of the late President Butterfield’s old principles: ‘All education is a gamble on the maturity of the people to be educated.’ We’re not given,” Arnold added, “to the irritable reaching for certainty. Students need a high tolerance for ambiguity and openness.”

Graduates of each program can probably identify with an observation made by Davis, that the “special community of scholar-students and teachers still lives on, much as President Butterfield imagined it. For those of us who experienced that *rite de passage*—the completion of a major written work, the sense of hard-earned recognition by a demanding faculty, or the conquest of a daunting opponent over 64 squares—the COL is still a special home. And I, for one, am looking forward to our next symposium, when we’ll actually discuss literature.”



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Not to be outdone, Alen Hamza ’02 and Edna Togba ’02 show why students in the College of Letters get bleary eyes.

THE BEGINNINGS

In the 1950s most American colleges, including Wesleyan, relied on lectures as their primary pedagogical method. Intellectual inquiry was neatly compartmentalized into clear-cut disciplines; departments were powerful and stratified. Interdisciplinary studies were highly unusual, almost nonexistent.

Victor L. Butterfield, Wesleyan’s 11th president, believed that something needed to change. Butterfield felt that it was time for Wesleyan to expand, to open the university to a larger number of well-qualified students, while still retaining the benefits of smallness. Deeply interested in the philosophy of education and influenced by Alfred North Whitehead’s *THE AIMS OF EDUCATION* as well as the model of instruction used at Oxford and Cambridge universities, Butterfield charged Wesleyan’s Educational Policy Committee to develop a vision and a plan for engaging students more profoundly in their own education.

As originally conceived, the College Plan sought to remake the entire university. Instead of a traditional departmental structure within a loose divisional organization, Butterfield and the EPC proposed a “federation of Colleges,” each with an interdisciplinary focus. Each College was to have its own faculty, student body, concentration programs, offices and classrooms, and social cohesiveness.

While some faculty embraced [the College Plan] wholeheartedly, others had deep-seated reservations. For some, it may have been a reluctance to try something new and risky when the old approaches were at least moderately successful. Others believed that students were not really as mature as Butterfield hoped. Still others objected to the idea that the whole university participate.

Nevertheless, the College Plan was approved by both the faculty and the board of trustees with significant enthusiasm. Wesleyan’s adoption of a modified version of the College Plan ushered in a period of spirited debate about learning, and resulted in fundamental curricular and social changes that are still with us today.

[Excerpts from an introduction by Suzy Taraba ’77, university archivist, prepared for an exhibit at Olin Library titled “A Radical Proposal: The College Plan at Forty.”]