

ALVERNO COLLEGE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Historical Background of the CBL Program

The Competence Based Learning program which became operational in September 1973, has been four years in the making. As a result of faculty and student discontent with the quality of their learning interaction during the 1968-69 academic year, the 1969-70 academic year began with a series of activities innocuously titled "September '69." The reason for the title was to enable the mutual raising of questions concerning responsibilities for learning to take place in an atmosphere that was not pre-charged by slogans or a provocative title. There was enough potential dynamite in the role reversal implicit in the activities that constituted the three-day experience.

What was begun that September may be termed a consciousness-raising activity which set in motion a discussion ranging from course flexibility to interdisciplinary courses to a suggestion for a completely unstructured initiating college experience for freshmen. It was a time of exploring on the part of both faculty and students of the whole potential gamut of academic change. Though there was movement over the next two years, it was somewhat fitful. In spring 1971, these extended discussions and ideas again came to focus in a series of meetings that highlighted the following questions:

1. What kinds of questions are being asked by professionals in your field that relate to the validity of your discipline in a total college program: In other words, what are the burning issues? What is your department's position on these? How are

you dealing with these current problems in the general education courses and in the work for a major in your field?

2. What are you teaching that is so important that students cannot afford to bypass courses in your department(s)?
3. If we expressed general education requirements in terms of expected outcomes rather than in terms of courses, what contributions does your department make to them?
4. How do you see your department in relation to other disciplines?
5. (For the professional departments: Nursing, education, music, physical education, medical technology.) In what way are courses in your department integrated into the liberal arts college so that they differ from those in a purely professional school?

Within those discussions, what began as a question of outcomes of general and professional education became a question of outcomes of liberal education. With consensus that an effort should be made to achieve a working definition of such outcomes, the faculty undertook this effort at the May 1971 Faculty Institute.

Four outcomes were identified: Problem-solving, Communication, Valuing and Involvement. It was agreed that the committee structure for the coming year, 1971-72, would be the entire faculty in a Curriculum Committee, sub-divided into four task forces on the basis of the four outcomes. Each task force, which included students, was to work with one outcome to define it in such a way that it could serve as a guide for curriculum change.

In the spring of 1972 a matrix setting forth these outcomes of learning as student goals and indicating a strategy for achieving them was presented to the entire faculty. The further refining of this matrix was the

work of the Faculty Institute of May 1972.

To facilitate the work of restructuring the learning environment so that the emphasis on outcomes would gradually become the focus as much as inputs, an Academic Task Force was set in motion by releasing four faculty members half time.

The work of 1972-73, then, was focused first on the production of a rationale for the program -- a paper which came to be titled "Liberal Learning in a Management Context." (See Appendix A) The work undertaken this year was also to see the major breakthrough of the program in the effort to assess and graduate a student on the basis of the achievement of competence in the context of content. The faculty had agreed on eight competences as a working set of outcomes of liberal learning. The development of six developmental levels for each competence became the basis for the concept of the competence level unit (CLU) which enabled Alverno to set aside the credit hour accumulated into semester hours as the basis for the baccalaureate degree. This is the unique aspect of the Alverno program.

The specific behaviors associated with each level are continuously being refined. It is at the heart of the development of assessment instruments and procedures necessary both for student appraisal and program validation.

With the document on competence levels, Alverno was able to undertake the curriculum work it has envisioned since 1969. In summary, the process for curricular change spread over these years looks like this:

- 1969 - Becoming conscious of need for change
- 1970 - Focusing in on areas for change
- 1971 - Concepting the kind of change
- 1972 - Designing the guidelines for the form and the structure of curricular change
- 1973 - Inaugurating the preliminary levels of CBL
- 1974 - Evaluation of the first year program

Competence-based liberal learning in a management context, at this point in time, however, is still held within the parameters of the curriculum that preceded it -- namely, the traditional liberal arts disciplines with strong professional programs in education and nursing. Now the entire set of curricular options (content) must be broadened just as the process of education at Alverno has been broadened by competence measured by achievement (CLU's) rather than accumulation of time exposures (credit hours).

But the institutional mission of Alverno is not completely stated when its mission vis-à-vis its students has been described in curricular terms. Alverno considers its mission also to include a more global approach -- namely, to design a new collegial model, different from a university model, for post-secondary education. Experiments like Santa Cruz have sought to have the best of both worlds -- the college and the university. But to date, their success, either from the point of view of the process of education or the economics of education, remains problematic. There is more than room then for exploration of what constitutes a viable college. We seek as a part of the mission of Alverno College to produce both a theoretical and an operational model that will demonstrate an alternative form of organization that is neither the university model in miniature nor the business model in function.

Alverno addresses itself, through CBL and competence assessment, and the achievement of a new collegial structure, not only to the possibility of playing a meaningful role in a civilized society, but to the achievement of the integration of intellectual and affective competence of a high order that will contribute to the continued development of what is yet to be a truly civilized society.

work of the Faculty Institute of May 1972.

To facilitate the work of restructuring the learning environment so that the emphasis on outcomes would gradually become the focus as much as inputs, an Academic Task Force was set in motion by releasing four faculty members half time.

The work of 1972-73, then, was focused first on the production of a rationale for the program -- a paper which came to be titled "Liberal Learning in a Management Context." The work undertaken this year was also to see the major breakthrough of the program in the effort to assess and graduate a student on the basis of the achievement of competence in the context of content. The faculty had agreed on eight competences as a working set of outcomes of liberal learning. The development of six developmental levels for each competence became the basis for the concept of the competence level unit (CLU) which enabled Alverno to set aside the credit hour accumulated into semester hours as the basis for the baccalaureate degree. This is the unique aspect of the Alverno program.

The specific behaviors associated with each level are continuously being refined. It is at the heart of the development of assessment instruments and procedures necessary both for student appraisal and program validation.

With the document on competence levels, Alverno was able to undertake the curriculum work it has envisioned since 1969. In summary, the process for curricular change spread over these years looks like this:

- 1969 - Becoming conscious of need for change
- 1970 - Focusing in on areas for change
- 1971 - Concepting the kind of change
- 1972 - Designing the guidelines for the form and the structure of curricular change
- 1973 - Inaugurating the preliminary levels of CBL
- 1974 - Evaluation of the first year program