

The Genesis of Community, Environment and Planning (CEP) and Undergraduate Education Reform

Over the past ten years we have been exploring what is possible when undergraduate education is a coupling of student life and a set of inter-related subjects of tremendous importance in the world today: community, environment and planning. CEP puts students in charge and broadens the meaning of undergraduate education.

Paradigm Shift

CEP can trace its roots to reformations in undergraduate education that began in the early '80's and continue today. The paradigm shift, in brief, has been from "college is an institution that exists to provide instruction" to "college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything."¹ In the new learning paradigm, college is not about delivering knowledge from faculty to students through courses. Instead, college is creating environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems.² CEP is an active, vital manifestation of this ideal.

UW Undergraduate Reform

The University of Washington, in the late '80's, responded to this shift by establishing the Office of the Undergraduate Dean and the Carlson Leadership and Public Service Program to coordinate new initiatives affecting undergraduate education. In the early '90's, the UW proclaimed diversity, undergraduate education and interdisciplinary research and teaching as its highest institutional priorities. Building from these, a 1994 Presidents' Task Force addressed, "What can be done to make the most of a student's time on campus so that learning occurs not only within, but beyond the classroom?"

¹ *From Teaching to Learning – A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education*. Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, *Change* – November/December, 1995. Pp. 13-25, p. 14.

² *Ibid.* p. 15.

Recognizing the difficulty of shifting resources and meeting the challenges, it called on all departments and colleges to find ways to begin to move forward. It noted, “It is likely that relatively small changes will make a substantial difference, and as successful ideas are developed, we can build on these for a comprehensive solution.” CEP was one of those small changes.

Changing the College’s BA

In the early ‘90’s, the College of Architecture and Urban Planning decided to reorganize its BA degree in Design and Planning Studies, uncoupling the architecture-focused stream from planning. This opened the door. By 1992-93 the chair of the Department of Urban Design and Planning, with urging from undergraduate students in his studio course, began to explore how to construct a new major responsive to University’s new objectives and relevant to the planning challenges facing the world. One thing was for sure: it would not be designed for the students, but rather with them. This was both a practical and philosophical matter; it couldn’t get done without students, and meaningful change that fully embodied the new learning paradigm could only come from doing it in partnership with students.

Colloquium to Craft New Major

In Fall, 1993, with Departmental support and critical help from Dean Fred Campbell in the Office of Undergraduate Education, Paul Niebanck, Visiting Professor in Urban Design and Planning, invited students to take part in a 4-credit, two-quarter long Colloquium on the Major in Community and Environment. Twelve students stepped forward to assess the failures of the old program and chart the promises of a new one. The term “colloquium” was expressive of the intent. This was not an old paradigm class but rather a model of what could become a core and defining experience of the new major. As defined in the colloquium syllabus: “It will help to guide its members through...It will serve as a forum for discussion of planning as a force for constructive change at this time of social and environmental crisis. It will itself be a planning

endeavor, self-constructed and self-realized by its members. Its purpose is to discover and assess the possibilities, in actual practice, of a new major.” Later, as the major got underway, this form of learning-in-practice-together would be called “living the major.”

CEP: Planning and Liberal Education

Leaders in planning education had also been looking at educational reform during this time and CEP is a manifestation of this work as well. In 1989, the American Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) Commission on Undergraduate Education issued a report summarizing their work.³ CEP can trace its roots, in part, to it. The Commission assessed existing undergraduate planning programs and identified untapped potential for future programs. Four new ways emerged. These involved looking at different kinds of relationships between undergraduate and graduate professional education, studying planning as a discipline rather than as a profession, and exploring planning as a part of liberal education.⁴

CEP’s roots tap the Commission’s “Citizenship” approach which “would emphasize planning as a point of view about the world and the way it works rather than as a profession or discipline. Such a program could be located in a research university, but might be more suited to a liberal arts college, especially one with a long-standing commitment to innovative education and /or social issues. The citizenship purpose would suggest an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or problem-solving model for undergraduate education, and it would deal with a broad substantive range of issues.”⁵

The Commission urged ACSP member institutions to explore a variety of experiments “to place undergraduate planning education squarely in the middle of institutional discussions and activities.” CEP did so at the UW - the first and perhaps the only experiment thus far. The genesis of CEP came four years after the Commission’s

³ I used the Commission’s DRAFT Report, September, 1989. The Report was also printed in JPER, c. early 1990.

⁴ DRAFT Report, p. 28.

⁵ p. 29.

report. Paul Niebanck, then a Professor of Environmental Studies at University of California Santa Cruz, had chaired the seven-person Commission.

We Make the Road by Walking

The students in Paul's 1993-94 UW Colloquium came together for different reasons. Some came forward to help shape the future; others were attracted to the seminar by its uniqueness - a chance to plan something they cared about and to reflect upon their own educational experience.

Together they shared their basic values, reviewed critically their own education, imagined the potential for a contemporary education, speculated on preferred alternatives, analyzed the University's resources, outlined the shape and content of a new major, and negotiated its approval with the UW administrators. They practiced, in a preliminary way, what the major was intended to be in the long run: an on-going experiment in mutual learning and guidance, from initiation to implementation, from personal empowerment to enlightened service.

Following the 2-quarter long Colloquium with Paul, a small group of five students carried the work to conclusion in the Spring Quarter. Louis Herrera, a graduate student in urban design and planning, helped to manage this important work with the chair as the proposal for the new major underwent the necessary reviews and approvals.

CEP Begins with 16 Pioneers, Fall 1994

Professors Paul Niebanck and Dennis Ryan welcomed the first cohort of 16 with a day-long orientation – who are we, what do each of wish to accomplish over the next two years, what do we bring to this learning work, what are our fears, and how will we work together? The first CEP 301 seminar⁶, *The Idea of Community*, continued this pattern of mutual construction, dialog and insistent focus on honoring individuals within the context

⁶ We met in Thompson Hall. CEP had planted itself squarely in the middle of the liberal studies, acknowledging its intention to be a vital intersection for students with differing disciplinary interests and a common concern for c, e and p.

of a newly developing learning community. In the words of Joe Brown, CEP 1996, who was one of the five from the spring to join the new major: “We designed a major that we felt would satisfy our educational cravings for relevance, autonomy, and personal responsibility. As a direct result of our efforts, the Community and Environmental Planning (CEP) major was offered as of Autumn Quarter, 1994.”⁷ Joe Brown and the other four (we call them the Founders) were members of the first cohort of 16 who began their two-year program that autumn. We refer to this 1st cohort as the Pioneers. The essential elements of what they envisaged and brought into being as a major continue today to be the framework of the CEP program. Again, drawing from Joe Brown:

“For example, we stated early on that ‘we expect that all graduates of CEP will be advocates of long-term care for the environment and society.’ That remains true. From the beginning, the program was envisaged as insistently interdisciplinary. Each student would be free to choose courses from a variety of disciplines and would be expected to bring the related learning back into the core CEP seminars. That interdisciplinary focus remains central to the program. The importance of reaching beyond University walls through field work was also realized early on.”⁸

CEP graduated this first cohort of sixteen in spring, 1996. In Spring, 1997 the last cohort of 16 graduated because during their two years, they decided – by consensus - to double the size of the program in order to serve a growing demand and to claim a larger responsibility in the UW’s efforts at undergraduate reform. In June, 1998 two cohorts of sixteen graduated. This pattern has continued to present, although the cohorts increased to seventeen. This increase was possible because more and more students were beginning to

⁷ *Paideia*, vol. 5, no. 3, spring, 1997.

⁸ *Paideia*, p. 8.

study abroad, thus opening up space in the core seminars during their absence. CEP will have graduated about 200 when it completes its 8th year of operation in spring 2002.

A fine beginning

The program has grown and matured and there are many, many stories about this and about each CEP participant (student, faculty, and staff) who has contributed. They must be told elsewhere. But a few highlights:

Recognition - In Spring of 1997, *President McCormick* paid a call on CEP, at the invitation of the students. In an email message following, he declared, "I wish every element of our great university was as swiftly responsive to new learning opportunities as the students and faculty of this program. Congratulations - and thank you for a wonderfully well-spent hour with these awesome students." Two years later CEP received the University's first prestigious *Brotman Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Education*, an honor it shared in spring, 1999 with Geography. The formation of the CEP *Stewards Council* in winter, 2001, recognized the maturity of this experiment and its readiness to engage a larger world.

Assessment - CEP has remained an intense and comprehensive experiment. It is continually changing, responding to new understandings and new opportunities. After its first three years, it conducted a thorough and demanding evaluation in several forms, facilitated by the Center for Instructional Development and Research (CIDR). An ongoing sequence of focus groups and private interviews augmented a continuing consultative relationship between CIDR staff and key CEP faculty and student committees. In 2000-2001, CEP reviewed itself again, this time in connection with the new staff position for program operations. Over the next two years, prior to completing its first decade, CEP will undertake a major-wide assessment and review.

What Have We Learned?

Educational Potential of Governance - While CEP was created with student governance in mind, no specific provision was made for it, nor was its content prescribed.

Immediately and then over time, successive cohorts have designed, refined and adjusted a vibrant structure for governance that is consensual, accessible, flexible, responsive and appropriately decisive. The simple structure of oversight has returned a huge educational benefit for all participants.

CEP is an Open Major - The major requires insights and approaches from across the disciplinary range. Many CEP students do complementary work in sociology, political science, geography, environmental studies, and programs in the College – urban design and planning, landscape architecture and architecture. But double majors in international and area studies, POE, forestry, American Indian studies, ethnic studies, CHID, speech communications, Slavic languages, dance, art, geology, and business administration, among others, have also been undertaken. These are diverse enough to open a broad territory for exploration, to strengthen the interdisciplinary nature of the program and to enliven the core seminars. We have learned that for CEP to be an open major and to provide a “place” where students can bring their disciplinary interests and learning together we must guard against the institutional tendencies to “fill the place in” with disciplinary content found elsewhere on campus.

The Subject is Planning - In every dimension of the major, planning⁹ is practiced. A strategic plan was constructed six years ago and has become a vital part of this major. CEP may be the only major in the country – certainly at the UW – to have a self-constructed plan and to be using it! Planning is everywhere. CEP students are decision -

makers, inventors and co-creators. In the governance, planning merges with politics and management. Debate, dialogue, listening, negotiation, decision, and implementation are what command attention. The CEP experiment demonstrates that a carefully designed major in planning can energize and provide purpose for undergraduate liberal arts students who have an interest in preparing for participation in public life.

CEP – initiated as an on-going experiment in undergraduate education - has aptly demonstrated the potentials of 1) the UW's aims for a rich, interdisciplinary, engaged educational experience, and 2) the spirit and intent of the ACSP Commission's call to explore possibilities for weaving planning and liberal arts and sciences together at the undergraduate level. Stay tuned.

⁹ The term planning in CEP is broadly conceived as communicative action.