

The Urban Semester: An Experimental Educational Program

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As part of the increased awareness and demand for relevant educational experiences, and as a result of a growing concern for problems of racism and poverty, an experimental program for undergraduates known as the "Urban Semester" was established at the University of Connecticut in the Fall of 1968. The rationale of the Program was the development of intense involvement and understanding of urban problems. It was felt that such involvement could not be developed in a part-time program where the students' primary home base was still the sheltered, white, middle-class campus community. Instead, small groups of students have been allowed to live and work in a low income section of a large city for a semester while receiving full academic credit. A black ghetto area in Hartford, Connecticut, was chosen as the site of the Program.

The Program has been in operation for four consecutive semesters in the 1968-69 and 1969-70 academic years. The purpose of this article is to describe the first two years (four semesters) of the Program, some of the problems encountered, and some of the improvements contemplated or in effect, that have been made.

Student Selection Procedures

The Program is primarily directed at juniors, although seniors and even sophomores have been admitted. Juniors have been favored because they have the benefit of two prior years of college, while still having at least two semesters of ordinary course work remaining. After their experiences in the Program, the students return to the main campus where they come into contact with former classmates. Classes now take on new meaning as a result of their experiences, and they are also in a position to discuss ghetto and social problems with their peers in an informed way.

The admission requirements for the program have been rather loosely structured because of the experimental nature of the Program, and differed for each semester. The first group was selected on the basis of individual interviews, conducted by faculty members during the summer before the first semester of the Program. Initially, faculty recommendations were contacted directly and asked to return to the campus during the summer for the selection interviews. Out of 28 interviewees, seven were finally selected for the first group, five women and two men.

Once the Program had begun, considerable publicity was generated on the main campus of the University. Consequently, there were nearly 70 applicants for the second semester. Most of the new applicants did not come directly through faculty recommendations, but took the initiative themselves in applying. Because of the large number of applicants, the selection procedures were modified, and the students were interviewed in groups. Five faculty and one urban semester participant from the first semester, divided into two teams, served as selection examiners. Each group was seen by one team of examiners for 1 hour, and were then seen by the second team. There were six groups of applicants in all. The focus of the discussion in the groups varied widely and included interpersonal relations, relevant prior experiences, attitudes toward racism, interracial marriage, and so forth. Those students with the highest examiner ratings and most favorable faculty recommendations were selected. A total of eight students (four males and four females) were chosen for the Spring semester.

By the end of the second semester, interest in the Program had begun to wane on campus, and there were only about 20 applicants for the following Fall. These individuals were seen for interviews by the director and two faculty advisors of the Program, operating as a team. After the interview, each appli-

cant was discussed briefly. After all the applicants had been seen, the interviewers jointly ranked men and women separately, in order of preference. The top eight applicants, four girls and four boys, were selected. During the summer, one further male was added to the group, following faculty recommendations and individual interviews with the director.

The fourth group was again selected from among a small set of about 20 applicants. In this case, 12 students were selected, following individual interviews with the director. One other male student was later added to this group.

Unless the student was close to failing, grade point average was not used specifically as a criterion for selection in any of the four groups.

Academic Arrangements

When the Program was originally formulated, it was realized that the students who participated would have to be given formal academic credit for their work—so as not to delay them in their academic careers (nor endanger the student status of the draft-age men). Since the normal credit load at the University was 15 credit hours, a similar credit arrangement was worked out for Program participants. For the first group, nine credit hours were given for "Independent Study," supervised by the director. Although the students were required to keep a written record of their experiences, which was to be handed in at the end of the term, essentially, nine credit were being given for the student's work at the agency where he had been placed. The remaining six credits were divided into two special sections of regular courses taught at the main campus. The students had to commute to the campus for these courses once a week.

The on-campus courses were planned to be taught on a tutorial basis by individual instructors, but the students could not keep up with the regular course

assignments. Their work in Hartford and evening discussions with guests consumed most of their time. The students also had great difficulty in simultaneously adjusting to inner-city living and maintaining some semblance of a campus schedule.

For the second semester, the credit arrangements were reorganized into a more realistic and workable system. Instead of two formal courses, given on the University campus, one formal course was arranged. This was an interdisciplinary seminar on "Minority Conflict and Social Change," given by speakers from different departments in the University. Each speaker spent one evening in discussion with the students at their apartment in the ghetto. Speakers were drawn from the School of Education and the departments of Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, History, English, and Speech. Topics included the history of slavery in the United States, the economics of Black capitalism, leadership patterns in the ghetto, the model of colonialism as applied to black-white relations in the ghetto, education in the ghetto, and several others.

This system made for freer exchanges of ideas between the students and their professors in an informal atmosphere, gave the faculty member some idea of how the students were living, and saved a considerable amount of time and effort in arranging for the students' trips back to the main campus. This seemed to be a successful arrangement, and is one which is to be continued in future semesters. During the third and fourth semesters, the list of speakers was expanded to include individuals from Hartford in an attempt to draw on locally-available expertise and/or special knowledge of the city and its workings. The title of the seminar was changed to the more general "Urban Problems," and funds for honoraria for speakers from the local community were generously made available by the University's Council on Human Relations.

The interdisciplinary seminar was given for three credits, leaving twelve credits to be made up. To accomplish this, each student registered in each of two departments for six hours of independent study in each department. This was necessary because there existed a University regulation prohibiting students from registering for more than six credits of independent study in any one department in any one semester. During the second semester, students earned their credits by writing a short paper for each of their independent study supervisors, based on some aspect of their work in Hartford. This proved unsatisfactory, however, for several reasons. First, agency personnel in the individual placements voiced resentment over their feeling they were being "studied." Second, students frequently told their supervisors they would work on a project at the beginning of the term, only to find they were unable to obtain the necessary information as they progressed through the semester. Third, each campus supervisor only glimpsed a small fragment of the participant's experience, and missed entirely the experiences of the other members of the group.

This arrangement was therefore changed again. For the third and fourth semesters, the participants collectively wrote a lengthy term-end report, covering several phases of their experiences and work. Persons who had participated in particular group projects during the semester signed their names to that portion of the report dealing with the project. (Group projects will be discussed below.) Agency work, done by individuals, was reported separately. This report was mimeographed, and circulated to all of the independent study supervisors, serving in lieu of separate term papers. This method gathered much of the students' experiences together in one report, gave campus readers a broad picture of the students' activities, and was generally received with enthusiasm and praise. The report was also circulated to agency supervisors in Hartford, making the groups' activities and reports available to anyone who might be interested, or who might benefit from some of the information contained in it.

Agency Placements

The first two semesters, each student served as a full-time "intern" at one of several private or public service agencies in the local community. The agencies ranged from a half-way house for paroled con-

victs to a church-supported neighborhood center. Also included were a "street academy" where high school dropouts were encouraged to participate in various kinds of training leading to a high school equivalency degree, Neighborhood Legal Services offices, Job Training programs, a school and prenatal care program for pregnant girls who had dropped out of high school, a church rectory, and several Federally-funded neighborhood centers. In each case, the agency placement was discussed beforehand with agency personnel, and the student was supervised by someone from the agency. Gradually, as they became more familiar with the work, the students began to take on greater responsibilities. A student might work at finding an apartment for a welfare family that had been evicted, organize a neighborhood "block" dance, tutor grade school children, or conduct a class in judo and self-defense. In addition to their work during the day, as the semester progressed, most of the students became increasingly involved in the lives of people they met through their work, and more and more of their "leisure" time began to be spent in neighborhood activities.

In general, the agency placements were considered to be quite successful. By having a fixed place of work, the students were given a stable locus to help them in orienting themselves to the community. They were immediately brought into contact with ghetto people and problems, and began to develop a set of referents for understanding life in the ghetto. They did so under the supervision and guidance of people who were already familiar with the ghetto neighborhood where they were working. At the end of each semester, the agency supervisors were generally agreed that the students had all done well in their jobs, and they all expressed willingness to have students work with them the following semester.

While this aspect of the program was successful, some problems did arise. During the first week of the semester, the students were for the most part receiving more time and supervision from agency personnel than was warranted by the amount of service they were able to provide. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that by the time a student was able to function well on his own, the semester was often half over. Soon, a new student, again in need of training would replace him, and the pro-

cess would begin again. Many of the agencies felt, justifiably, that the University should provide them with more support, to repay them for their efforts. On the positive side, it should be said that the agency personnel have almost unanimously been willing to take on new students as the Program has progressed. Most agency supervisors have expressed the opinion that the Program was a valuable one, worth continuing, and have assumed the burden for educating students with a willingness that bespeaks their understanding and insight into the nature and purposes of the Program. At least, for once, the white people from the suburbs have come into the ghetto for direct participation and study, instead of forcing the black people to come to them, and instead of asking black people to "explain" life in the ghetto. If the experiences reported here are any guide, it should not be difficult to work out similar agency placements in other urban centers, as other programs like the present one are developed.

Group Projects

During the first two semesters, the students were essentially full-time at their respective agencies. This left them little time for visiting other agencies, or for becoming involved in other types of work. This was felt to be a limitation on the student's experiences, and so efforts were made to broaden them. During the third and fourth semesters, it was agreed with the agencies that the students would be allowed time off from their work, to participate in other projects. The students' group met regularly with the director once a week, and decided on and carried out various group projects. These projects included work for a black mayoralty candidate during his campaign, study of a sample of businesses damaged in the 1969 Labor Day riots, collecting data on housing code violations in local apartment buildings, an attempt to start a local coffee house for teenagers, help with the local Black Panther breakfast program, and helping organize a project not yet completed to establish a cooperative pharmacy in a local community center. Toward the end of each term, each group project was separately summarized, and included as part of the group's term-end report.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to this method of focusing students' activities. On the positive side, it gives the students a variety of experiences, both in the ghetto and in wider areas of

the city, which they would not otherwise have had. It also capitalizes on the time, energy, mobility, imagination, and ability to deal with bureaucracy inherent in a student group such as this. As some projects come to completion, the students are allowed the luxury of feeling that at least some of their efforts at improvement of ghetto conditions have paid dividends, no matter how small. Hopefully, some genuine benefits also accrue to the local community in the process.

On the negative side, there is probably at least a partial trade-off between time spent on group projects, and time spent working with and getting to know individuals in the community. To the extent a student spends his time interviewing individual store owners, or inspecting living conditions in an apartment building, he does not spend time tutoring or working directly and at length with individuals or families. The latter permits him to get to know a few people and their lives more intimately; the former sacrifices this, but gives a broader perspective of social conditions in the ghetto. Between these two extremes, some sort of balance must be sought, and the balance will vary, depending on the needs and interests of the individual student. Naturally, all such group projects require careful planning and supervision.

The Students' Group

Most of the students entering the program had not known one another previously, and so some opportunity had to be provided for them to become acquainted. The first week of each semester served this purpose, as well as the more general one of orientation to the community. During the first week, the students were not required to work at their agencies. Instead, the group as a whole generally visited the police department, neighborhood schools, a large, well-equipped school in a wealthy suburb, and made preliminary visits to the agencies. Much of the time was left unstructured. During this time the students began making their housekeeping arrangements. Instead of paying their meal fees to the University, they pooled their money in a joint checking account. One member of the group acted as the bookkeeper, and two other members were empowered to draw checks on the joint account. Shopping was done at neighborhood stores, and in supermarkets toward the fringes of the ghetto area (pro-

viding concrete experience with one of the problems ghetto residents face daily, the prices locally being higher, and the quality of the food being lower than in stores in out-lying areas.) A local co-op was discovered which supplied bread, milk, and eggs at reduced prices. These and numerous other household chores provided occasions for group interactions.

Improvements

When the Program was begun, it was expected that improvements and changes would be a continuous part of the operation—at least for the next two or three years. One change has already been described, that of substituting “independent study” credits for the formal course registrations which were used in the first semester. This, however, was only a temporary arrangement since some faculty members felt that credit for independent study should be reserved for special research topics or library work, and should not be used to give credit for field work. Eventually the credit arrangements will have to be rationalized, perhaps on the basis of establishing special “field work” course titles and credits within the University.

Another change has been substitution of a group term-end report in place of individual term papers. This seemed to be a better system of reporting the group’s experiences to supervisors in both agencies and within the University, and will be continued.

Everyone connected with the Program has generally agreed that local housing for the director and his family should be provided by the University. This was tried during the third semester, and worked well. This is another feature of the Program that will probably be continued.

Additional personnel are clearly necessary to maintain coordination of the Program. During the fourth semester, there were 13 students, about the largest group one person could probably manage comfortably. In addition to having a full-time, on-site director, at a minimum, a half-time administrative officer should be available on the main campus, to handle course registration, and other details connected with the Program. Such a person could also help in identifying and selecting students for incoming groups, and could help maintain contact with students leaving the Program after they returned to the main campus.

A large living group raises many practical house-

keeping problems, and several major household appliances are necessary, if not absolutely essential. Among these are refrigerators (two or three, for a group of about 10 students), stove, automatic dishwasher, and large chest freezer. A dishwasher not only relieves the group of some of the burden of cleaning up after meals, it also helps to reduce the spread of colds and other communicable diseases within the group. A freezer is helpful in shopping for a large group. With a group of 10 students, an ordinary icebox will hold enough food for about two or three days, imposing an extra burden on the group for frequent shopping trips.

Another problem has also been mentioned above, the question of the length of time the student spends living in the ghetto. Often the student has just begun to function effectively, without extensive supervision, when he must return to the main campus to continue his regular academic work. The opinion is frequently voiced by both agency personnel and students that the program should cover a full year, rather than a single semester. While a year’s program would be desirable in terms of the student’s involvement in the ghetto, problems would arise in attempting to give a student fully one-fourth of his college education in a field-work setting. The question here is not the desirability of the field work, but the amount of traditional academic material the student would be missing while he was away from the main campus. If a student is, say, an English major, is the University justified in granting him a B.A. degree in English, without his having had the normal sequence of courses in that department? The argument applies with equal force in most departments, perhaps with the exception of Anthropology, where field work has traditionally been an accepted part of training. This problem has not been solved, and the Program is likely to continue to be restricted to one semester until satisfactory academic arrangements can be worked out. Perhaps ultimately a one-year field placement may become part of a separate department of Urban Studies, which could grant both course credit and major degrees.

The Program as it stands presently is deficient in two areas which could be easily corrected if additional personnel were available. The first of these is orientation for students coming into the Program, and the second is continued reorientation for former participants returning to the main campus. It would

be a simple matter to organize a one- or two-credit course within the normal University course structure, to run for six to eight weeks during the regular semester, for students who were interested in applying for the Program. The group could study relevant literature, discuss the Program with the director and other experts in the area, visit the students then living in the ghetto, and perhaps accompany them to visit some of the neighborhood agencies. Even if only a few persons from such a reading group became participants the following term, it would strengthen the in-coming group, since some of the new members would already have some familiarity with the situation.

The other side of this problem is the lack of formal follow-up for returning participants. Frequently the participants from a particular group manage to keep in contact with one another, but only on an informal basis. A reading group, or even informal meetings with returning participants would help the students integrate their experiences, and could also point out relevancies between their field experience and their current class work. Returning participants frequently have the feeling they have had to give up a situation in which they were engaged—meaningful, relevant work—in favor of one in which they are placed in classes which seem, by contrast, to be boring and irrelevant, and they frequently complain of this after returning to the main campus. Perhaps some meetings and opportunity for discussion with professors, older veterans of the Program, or University officials might help them feel their experiences and opinions were valued by the University community. Indeed, such discussions might help University teaching personnel by stimulating them to include some needed concern with practical social problems in their courses.

As the group of participants has gotten larger, the weekly T-group sessions which formed part of earlier semesters have become more and more impractical. Up until now, the Program has depended largely on help volunteered from the Psychology Department and other areas. However, with 13 participants, it became necessary in the fourth semester to divide the T-group meetings into two subgroups, meeting separately. This required two leaders to be present for each meeting, and placed a further strain on already overburdened personnel. It would be desirable to provide leaders for such

groups, paid for from the Program budget, on a ratio of six students for each group leader. The value of such T-groups in maintaining harmony within the participants' group has been mentioned above.

Leases entered into by the University must be processed through a tortuous round of State offices and officials. The present leasing arrangements are cumbersome and time-consuming. At best, it takes six months from the time a property is decided upon, to the time the landlord receives his first payment. This process is easily disrupted, and it has taken as much as a year, in one instance, to complete. If the Program is to continue expanding, additional living space will be needed. It is essential that some arrangement be made which would allow for nearly immediate payment for properties which might be leased for Program use. Most ghetto areas are high in population density, and low in available housing. The Program is thus in competition for space with other persons and agencies who are usually prepared to begin making rent payments immediately. Most landlords prefer immediate payment to getting entangled with the State bureaucracy, and indeed, many landlords operate on such small profit margins they cannot afford a six months' delay in rent payments. In this case, red tape is clearly a hindrance to future Program development.

Eventually a point will be reached where the existing group will be deemed large enough for the neighborhood in which it is living and working. At that point, further expansion should probably take place through the formation of "satellite" groups, either in other areas of Hartford, or in other large cities in the state. For example, there is a growing Puerto Rican and white slum area in the south part of Hartford. A separate group started there could have the support of the present north-end group while it was getting started and gaining experience in its own area. Eventually, the satellite group could become independent of the parent group, having its own director, seminar programs, agency placements, and other relevant arrangements as the group or the neighborhood might demand. Once some experience had been gained with starting one such satellite, new groups could be started in other cities.

Conclusion

Many Universities offer some opportunity for

students to gain credit by participating in some form of field work, but most such programs are offered as only a small part of the student's overall academic program in any one semester. For example, the student may receive from one to three credits for tutoring school children from a ghetto neighborhood, or for working with institutionalized mental patients. Usually such programs are conducted on a once-a-week basis. In the Urban Semester, in contrast, the students are full-time in the agencies where they work, and in addition live in the same neighborhood. They are exposed to the full continuity and range of neighborhood activities. They can and do form friendships in the neighborhood, and can easily observe situations, problems, and personal interactions as they develop from day to day. This provides them with a total experience, rather than a partial one. This aspect of the Program makes it relatively unique.

The first four groups were part of a pilot attempt to determine whether or not the Program would be workable at all. It has worked well, and is being continued. The group was accepted by the agencies where they worked, and by residents in the neighborhood. Although there were problems, relations between the University and agency personnel have been maintained, and it is hoped that these may be expanded in the future. The students who have participated in the program have unanimously felt that the experience was a personally important, enlightening, and meaningful one—and one they could not have had had they remained for four years on campus. The program seems to be worthy of emulation by other universities seeking to give their students a more direct and thorough knowledge of urban problems.

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