Best Laid Plans

By Dr. Steven Hayward

In Colorado College's Special Collections there's a photo of Glenn Brooks--the now-retired Professor of Political Science at the college who is generally credited with being the "father" of the block plan despite his modest protestations to the contrary. He's sitting in what appears to be the common room of a CC residence, surrounded by a group of students, leaning forward, hand held out sideways. Brooks is not quite forty, with a hipster beard and thick black-rimmed glasses that are a cross between the eyewear of an Atticus Finch and a Ryan Reynolds.

At first glance, Brooks appears to be making the kind of super intense point of the sort that super intense, relatively young faculty members who favor eyewear like his make a lot of the time. In fact, he's talking about the block plan. It's just an idea at that point, not yet adopted by the college, though most everyone on campus had heard of it and the idea seems to be catching on. Brooks held a lot of meetings with students during that time during which he did something that's now intimately familiar to those of us who teach or study at a school that runs on a block plan or similarly intensive modular mode of semester--he's explaining the block plan. The students surrounding him are still trying to get a handle on what it is exactly, how it would work--what it would really be like.

Hence Brooks's gesture with his hand. Like Don Shearn and Timothy Fuller--the two faculty colleagues with whom he worked most closely when the concept was in the early stages of being formed--Brooks seems to have thought of this new mode of curriculum delivery, at least initially, in spatial terms. Instead of four courses running all at once, he'd say, reaching his hand out sideways, students will take one at a time--he'd then tilt his hand up so his fingers were perpendicular.

The photo was taken in the spring of 1969. It was a year that began with Nixon being sworn in as President and with the Beatles taking to the Apple Records rooftop in London. The year of Woodstock. Across campuses in the United States students were involved in the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam war activism, voter registration campaigns in the South, and widespread protests. There were two hundred major demonstrations at more than 100 different campuses, and 471 smaller demonstrations at more than 211 different schools.

Within the more narrow context of the history of higher education it was a rare moment when things changed. The enrollment of more students than ever combined with unprecedented levels of investment in higher education collided with an overarching sense culturally that it was a time when questions could be asked of everyone and everything--including education. The result was the emergence of scores of innovative and experimental colleges. There was the College of Within, the College of the Person, the Campus-Free College, the Experimental College, to name a few of the more than 300 new institutions that appeared during those heady days. The Colorado College block plan was just one innovation among many--and a relatively mild one at that.

CC wasn't the first to adopt a one-course-at-a time-approach, but they believed they were. Brooks and his colleagues were at an advanced stage in their planning when they discovered Hiram College in Ohio which had attempted the same type of thing forty years earlier. Once lauded as the "Happiest College in the Land" Hiram's one course at a time plan began during the summer session after the stock market crash of 1929, when the college found itself unable to pay its faculty for summer session. Rather than closing down during the summer, the Hiram faculty proposed keeping it open. Each would teach one class at a time--a radical notion back then, when summer session ran classes concurrently. It was a great success, and soon Hiram began to consider moving it into the regular school year.

It was during this time that Hiram, like Colorado College, found other schools that had tried intensive learning models and abandoned them. One of them was Scio College in New Market Ohio, which in 1875 changed its name to the "The One Study University"--"the feature adopted," according to Scio's course catalog, was "unique in the history of schools, and had been attempted by no other school in the country." The One Study University plan, it seems, was to have students take *only* courses in their major, one at a time.

Hiram also uncovered a predecessor in Williamstown Female College, in South Carolina. Their one course at a time plan was adopted in 1877, the same year that Scio abandoned it. The Williamstown Block Plan involved dividing the school year into seven sections of 27 days each, and during each section the whole of the college was "focused on one department of study, to the exclusion of all the others." One can only imagine the versatility of *that* faculty. They would later abandon the experiment themselves, in 1907, according to the college's annual, "having watched its functioning for 23 years."

As to what happened at Hiram, and why it eventually dropped the plan, there are competing theories but it seems that their program of intensive learning came to take on the rigidity that it had sought to escape. In a similar way, for Brooks, the plan offers an escape from schedule, specifically from the bells that would ring out across campus near the top of each hour. The task, as he sees it, is one that involves finding a schedule suited to teaching and learning rather than chopping up subject matter and attempting to cram it into instructional periods unwavering and predetermined length. In the fall of 1969, a month before the vote for the adoption of the plan would take place, Brooks puts it this way:

> …there would be no class schedule. No bells would ring except for the bells on top of Shove Chapel. It would be up to the students—to the professor with the students to work out a class schedule for that day that seemed most appropriate…If we fail in the present instance to achieve the intended results. The faculty and students alike shall have suffered some inconveniences and some sacrifices. If we succeed, if the plan works out, either in its original form or with later modification based on experience, we shall have made a significant contribution to all of American higher education.

What must it have been like to be there? Did the students and faculty know they were on the cusp of implementing an innovation in higher education of such lasting import? There is more to be said about the faculty meetings that led to the block plan moving from wild idea to implementation, the institutional and cultural dynamics of how it unfolded with a speed that in retrospect seems typical of the time, when change was in the air. It was remarkable that the faculty voted to adopt the block plan in the first place but what's *more* remarkable is that it is still with us today. There were many Glenn Brookses at many institutions doing revolutionary things in education. Fifty years later, however, most of the educational innovations of those days are gone.

Not the block plan.

As to why it survives when so many other innovations of its time have withered away, the answer lies in its ability to *change*. The block plan looks like a schedule, but it's really a philosophy of how to focus attention and manage time in the classroom. From the first the plan has represented an attempt to take control of time, to carve out of the quotidian rush of the everyday a temporality designed specifically to facilitate learning, a schedule that would somehow remake our relationship with both time and subject matter and pedagogical space in order to lift both student and teacher out of the everyday and into a state of mind in which teaching and learning can take place. That challenge has a different shape today than it did in the late sixties and early seventies when ours and our students' attention is fractured in new and unprecedented ways. But there are also new opportunities, ways in which the modularity of the block plan might be particularly suited to the still newly emergent forms of digital and asynchronous flexibility. What's next? I won't hazard a guess, except to say that the journal you have in front of you will lead the way.