The Regis plan for individualization

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1982

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THE REGIS PLAN FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION

Prenote: During the 1970s, many schools experimented with the concept of individualization of instruction. As with most educational innovations, a relatively large number of individualization programs were initiated, a smaller number were seriously implemented, and very few were actually institutionalized. Regis High School in New York City was an institution where, in the mid-seventies, a major program of individualization of instruction proceeded through all three stages to produce a significantly changed educational program. The following description outlines the basic features of the Regis Plan for Individualization. Though changes were and are continually being made in the program and though the reality never fully matched the ideal described below, the program's basic principles and underlying structure have remained the same and given continuity and stability to the school for the last nine years.

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I. RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

To anyone familiar with educational movements in decade prior to 1975, one basic trend had been apparent--schools were moving from 'closed teaching systems' to more 'open learning systems.' The content of the curriculum shifted from a program which was narrow in scope, identical for every student, and determined by outside authority to one which had greater breadth of offerings, more openness to student choice, and enlarged adaptation to individual needs. Norms for student conduct both within and outside the classroom had moved from rigid restrictions imposed on a collective student body by continual

surveillance to the creation of a structured context where students could experience and learn from the exercise of greater freedom and responsibility. The concept of flexibility had invaded the use of both time and space; rigid, stationary architecture and furniture had been discarded in favor of space and furnishings capable of multiple uses; the collective pace and uniformity in the use of time had been supplanted by concern for individual or smaller group pacing and by time periods adapted to what was being learned and how it could be best learned. Arrangements which maximized administrative and teaching convenience were replaced by procedures which shifted the focus to greater adaptation to the student--making the school fit the student rather than vice versa.

These were but a few of the manifestations of the trend from closed teaching systems to open learning systems. In each area, members of the Regis High School faculty could recount changes in the operation of the school which had taken place in prior years in response to these trends. But the changes, based on the sound intuitions of reflective teachers, occurred piecemeal without a sense of their integration into a larger movement which could supply both a sense of coherence and direction, and, as any good model, provide insight into the alternatives and their long-range implications.

A year-long faculty study of the Regis program indicated the need and desire of Regis to achieve this overall sense of direction and coherence. In constructing a comprehensive model from the varied insights that surfaced in prior years, and considering the particular strengths and traditions of Regis, the following values had emerged as critical elements in any new program:

-- greater sensitivity to the personal and psychological dimensions of learning;

-- re-emphasis of the perennial objective of Jesuit education to educate the person towards both wisdom and a spirit of Christian service; a new stress on values, personal reflection, and commitment in the educational process;

-- reinterpretation of the notion of cura personalis (concern for the individual) traditionally associated with Jesuit education; changes in faculty-student interactional patterns to structure increased opportunity for personal contact;

-- continued strong emphasis on the intellectual and academic as the primary aim of any school and of Regis in particular in light of its admissions policies;

-- more flexible use of time, space and personnel to permit individual departments to mount a program more suited to the needs of their students, the talents of their personnel, and the nature of their disciplines;

-- a stress on student responsibility in both academic and out-of-class activities within a range appropriate to the level of maturity of the student; willingness to provide students with the context in which they could make and learn from mistakes;

-- with a decrease in the level of structure, a simultaneous increase in the amount of guidance and personal contact with faculty;

-- greater adaptation of the program to individuals in the selection of what would be learned, in the way it would be learned and in the pace at which it would be learned; increased opportunity for large group, small group and individual learning experiences;

-- greater practical realization of the opportunities available to Regis because of its location in the cultural center of New York City; development of this characteristic as an important feature of the unique educational alternative that Regis proposes to be;

-- additional resources to promote strong physical education and intramural and interscholastic athletic programs to parallel the strong academic position Regis has always maintained; and

-- overall, through a faculty committed to more than classroom instruction, the development of a unique environment which was simultaneously Catholic, Jesuit, independent and which placed the expectation of excellence on the performance of every member of the faculty and student body in whatever was undertaken.

II. THE KEY CONCEPT: INDIVIDUALIZATION OF INSTRUCTION

It was inevitable that a concept which was used to describe a great variety of programmatic changes would be surrounded by confusion. This certainly was the case with the concept of individualization of instruction.

The process of defining a new program for Regis involved, by necessity, an examination of the variety of meanings of individualization and an effort to sort out and define those features appropriate to Regis.

The key element in individualization was seen as a reflective adaptation to the unique talents and needs of the individual student. In the past, Regis students generally were dealt with in class groups rather than as individuals. A more individualized program would allow students to emerge from the large class group and would have three essential characteristics:

1. learning objectives selected by or prescribed for the individual student rather than for the entire class;

2. a method of achieving these objectives selected by or prescribed for the individual student; and

3. a pace of achievement of learning objectives either selected by or prescribed for the individual student.

Any individual or group planning for greater individualization would have to determine the degree to which the proposed plan provided for individualization in these three basic areas.

An interpretation of individualization in which the student worked completely on his own all of the time and did not interact with other students in small or large groups was judged to be an extreme interpretation. Such an interpretation might have been suitable for the accomplishment of selected educational goals but as a total school strategy presented substantial disadvantages. Individualization must provide students with a program which is geared to their needs, abilities and interests and which also gives them greater opportunity for self-activity. This involves increased interaction among students with similar interests or abilities, students who are pursuing the same objectives or moving at a similar pace. The picture of the student progressing through the school virtually isolated from the ideas, personalities and interests of fellow students was one to which the faculty did not subscribe. Clearly, it

was a question of balance and informed discretion. Certain educational objectives are best achieved by students working on their own; others through small group effort; still others are suited to a larger group setting.

Once the student assumed a more active role in defining his learning objectives and in devising procedures for their attainment at his own pace, he also assumed, in a significantly new way, the burden of increased responsibility and accountability. Unless the student came to appreciate that implicit in what he saw as his rights were corresponding duties, Regis would have done little more than to introduce an unproductive liberalism in the place of a genuine learning. The faculty saw its task as educating the student both in the theory of responsible freedom and in its intelligent application.

Initially, the student needed a great deal of assistance from the faculty. More accustomed to looking to his teachers for precise direction of his activities rather than to determining his own objectives and activities, the student often lacked confidence in the validity of his own insights. As he became convinced of the value of his objectives and the practicality of his methods, he generally required periodic reinforcement to reassure him on a day-to-day basis of the importance and feasibility of achieving his long-range goals. When, finally and ideally, these objectives had been realized, the student again required faculty assistance in evaluating the quality of his efforts.

Throughout this process the student was learning to do for himself much of what previously he expected others to do for him. He was in effect learning how to learn, and, whether or not he immediately appreciated the value of his achievement, he quickly experienced the difficulties it involved. Never before had the responsiblity for learning been so much his own. It was one thing to succeed or fail in attempting to meet demands imposed by others

and quite another to succeed or fail when demands were self-imposed. Because of the awesomeness of this burden, and, at the present time, its uniqueness, the student could not be expected to bear it unaided. He looked to the faculty for direction and support as well as for the sense of discretion which is the product of their experience and expertise. He expected the faculty to do much less for him and considerably more with him. The learning process became a corporate endeavor, the success of which involved a genuine mutuality of capabilities and concern--the student became responsible for actualizing his potential by interacting with the faculty-provided environment which allowed this to happen.

The goal was the self-initiating learner--a person who could organize clearly what he wanted to learn, could decide how he would accomplish the objectives he had set for himself, and could proceed at as fast a rate as was appropriate for him. To the extent that it was reasonable, given the maturity of the individual student, the teacher was expected to withdraw and allow the student to learn, being willing to guide more and direct less. The more the student who graduated from Regis needed his teachers to learn, the less the faculty had accomplished. This was an ideal against which the faculty had to be continually willing to examine methods of teaching, organization of materials, processes of evaluation, and both the individual classroom and the total school environment.

III. ELEMENTS OF THE REGIS PLAN FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION

A new approach to calculating staffing ratios - The traditional method of assigning teachers to a certain number of classroom periods per week was converted to a system whereby faculty resources were assigned on the basis of the number of students taking courses in a department. Assuming that all

teachers had homeroom or advisory responsibilities, each department received the services of one full-time teacher for every 100 students taking its courses. An additional one-fourth was added for departmental chair duties. This established an unusually favorable teacher-pupil ratio--approximately 1:13.9. By this decentralized approach to calculating faculty resources, departments gained significantly greater control and flexibility; within the limits indicated and with the approval of the Headmaster, the department chair now decided how to utilize teaching resources available to the department. This approach provided a solid basis for long-range total school planning as well as for departmental planning. It permitted staffing priorities to be proposed by those immediately concerned with execution.

A restructuring of the school day and the process of scheduling - The desire for greater flexibility in the use of time had been a constant theme in previous planning efforts, and was clearly a recommendation in both preliminary and final departmental reports on individualization. The pattern of eight 40-minute periods per day, five days a week, had been the basic Regis schedule for over two decades. Desired was a system which permitted greater adaptation of time periods and student groupings to departmental objectives. In attempting to meet this need, five versions of a modular schedule were produced and reviewed. Both 15 and 20-minute module possibilities were considered.

A 20-minute modular system with no passing time was adapted which provided for 18 modules per day and 90 modules per week. The school day was scheduled in 20-minute modules.

8:50 -	Module 1 Advisor Groups
9:10 -	2
9:30 -	3
9:50 -	4
10:10 -	5
10:30 -	6

10:50 -	7
11:10 -	8
11:30 -	9
11:50 -	10
12:10 -	11
12:30 -	12
12:50 -	13
1:10 -	14
1:30 -	15
1:50 -	16
2:10 -	17
2:30 -	18
2:50-55	Advisement

In addition to reducing the rigidity of the eight 40-minute periods-a-day time block, various departments desired to have greater flexibility in deciding the size of the groups with whom they worked. The chairmen consulted with their departments and evolved various meeting patterns which were then discussed with and approved by the Headmaster. The flexible time allotted in the different departments, is illustrated below.

a. single module - Advising (5--number per week)

b. double module - English (2), Modern Language (3), Classics (3), Social Studies (3), Health (1), Mathematics (4), Theology (3), Lunch (5), Chemistry (2), Biology (2), Speech--1st and 3rd years (1), Assembly (1), Group Guidance (1)

c. triple module - English (1), Film--2nd year (1), Physics (3), Chemistry (2), Biology (2), Classics -- first yr. (1)

d. quadruple module - Physical Education (1)

Variation was also introduced into group sizes. Instead of being only in classes of 30, students in the different years became members of a variety of groupings. In first year, for example, the student at times was a member of a group of 14 (English, Advising, Theology, Social Studies, Group Guidance), of a group of 28 (Classics, Mathematics, Physical Education, Biology), of a

of 70 (English), of a group of 140 (Theology). Students in the upper years similarly were involved in a variety of groupings. Obviously, additional combinations were possible both during unstructured time and in the case of students placed on totally independent study.

Use of a greater variety of learning resources - With the decision to establish departmental resource centers (see below) came a concomitant decision to provide the learning materials to make these centers effective. Expenditures for instructional materials were more than doubled. Parallel plans were evolved to use the rich resources easily available in the surrounding community because of Regis' unique location in the cultural heart of New York City. A Center for Outside Resources was established as part of the Regis Library to assist both faculty and students in the utilization of community resources.

Reduction of time spent in structured classes by students in freshman, sophomore and junior years. In previous years, students in the freshman, sophomore and junior years were scheduled into structured classes for virtually all of the 40 possible periods during the week. Though individual teachers had permitted students to work outside of class, usually this took the form of an outside assignment to be completed during the period. Students in the first three years were given virtually no time during the school day which they were able to structure for themselves. In senior year, on the other hand, most students enjoyed large blocks of unstructured time. The transition from the high structure of the first three to the relatively unstructured arrangements in fourth year was one of the most glaring and frequently discussed problems at Regis. To meet this problem, the amount of time spent in required classes by students in the first three years was reduced; correspondingly, the amount of time under the control of the individual student was

increased. The chart below illustrates the gradual introduction of unstructured time from freshman through senior year. Guaranteeing every student a reasonable amount of unstructured time did not disturb the established practice of allowing capable students release from regularly held classes at the discretion of the teachers. The increasing amount of unstructured time was adapted to the developing maturity of the student; it also allowed the individual teacher to retain the discretion to add unstructured time for a particular student or group of students. Thus, while every student was guaranteed a gradually increasing amount of unstructured time as he progressed from freshman to senior year, students who were able to demonstrate their ability to use productively greater amounts of time were permitted greater freedom by their teachers. Since 100% of the Regis students traditionally entered college, this process of developing the capacity to use unstructured time well was viewed as an essential preparation for the dramatically less structured environment of contemporary higher education.

Number of Modules of Required Class time by Year		
Freshmen	72 of 90	80%
Sophomore	69 of 90	77%
Junior	69 of 90	77%
Senior	59 of 90	66%

Introduction of An Advisor System - The need to provide students with time under their personal discretion was regarded as one of the most important and necessary changes. The high level of structure of the Regis program prior to 1973 imposed substantial limitations on students who were capable of greater

levels of interest and achievement. At the same time, the high level of structure prevented students who experienced problems from 'falling too far.' The question posed under the new system was how the student capable of enlarged freedom and initiative could be encouraged while the student who required more support and direction could be protected. Both scheduling and architectural consultants were clear in their insistence that any increase in the amount of unstructured time for students must be paralleled by an increase in the amount of academic guidance.

In the not too distant past, the cura personalis of the Jesuit high school had been effected mainly through a system of homeroom teachers who more often than not taught their homeroom charges two or three required courses. There was also usually a homeroom period. The homeroom teacher was the focus for the student of his life in the school at a time when both the academic and disciplinary life of the school were highly structured. In the process of greater specialization and departmentalization, this strong personal relationship between a class and its homeroom teacher was diminished, and nothing assumed its place. An important element of Jesuit education was lost. It became apparent that the need for such a relationship would be greater in an individualized program since students would not have the 'protection' of a highly structured school day. In recent years, the senior class had been allowed great freedom while the homeroom guidance system had become less rather than more effective. This negative experience was a glaring example of the results of the failure to expand guidance while decreasing structure. For teachers in the first three years, the homeroom responsibility in most cases had become mainly clerical rather than personal in its demands on their time. Both students and teachers had been placed in the position of having to fight the system in order to accomplish the values formerly associated with the homeroom teacher and homeroom period.

Operating out of teacher-pupil planning ratios indicated above, it was possible to devise an advisor system where approximately 15 students were assigned to each teacher. Keeping in mind the previously noted need for increased guidance as a result of enlarged amount of unstructured time, the new system had the advantage of identifying within the school the faculty member exercising general responsibility for a particular student.

The advisor was the faculty member in the school who, through daily contact with the individual student, came to know him best. The primary aim of the system was to identify someone who took a special interest in the student, in his academic and personal development at Regis. Though it was expected that the student would find in his classes, in extracurricular activities and in informal ways faculty members to whom he related easily, the advisor was viewed as the faculty member who (as delegate of the Headmaster) exercised formal responsibility for the day-to-day development of the student at Regis. The student's teachers in the individual disciplines would have an accurate knowledge of his progress in a subject; the advisor was expected to be aware of the student's progress in general so that a balanced and complete picture of the student emerged. The advisor was <u>not</u> expected to perform the functions traditionally associated with the professional counseling staff, but rather to be sensitive to the boy's need to seek the help of his counselor and to assist him in receiving special help. Similarly, the advisor was not expected to tutor the advisee in various subjects, but to be aware of the need for assistance and to encourage and help the student to secure it. The advisor was also the focus of contact between the school and the parents of an individual student.

The advisor met with his advisees each day during the first 20-minute module. Every advisee was expected to be present during the advisement

period. The advisor had the option of dealing with the group as a whole or with a subgroup or with an individual student. The student was also expected to check in with the advisor during the last ten minutes of each day.

Adaptation of the Regis school building. After a series of consultations with faculty members and students, especially department chairpersons, an architectural consultant submitted both a general report on the condition of the Regis building and the modifications recommended to provide the necessary spaces for the changing educational program. His original plan underwent four revisions on the basis of the reactions of the faculty in general and department chairpersons in particular. In planning actual changes, several criteria were used: concentration on instructional areas, avoidance of irreversible structural changes and expense. The plan finally adopted necessitated the removal of only one section of one wall between two classrooms.

As a consequence of the changes made, the following provisions were made:

-- resource areas for each department open to students on a full-time basis where both materials and teaching personnel were continually available;

-- increased utilization and spatial rearrangements which promoted maximum teacher-student availability;

-- clustering of classrooms for individual departments around the resource centers of those departments; and

-- a work area for every permanent faculty member within the departmental resource center; an area (lounge) for faculty study and relaxation which was off-limits to students.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE THEME--STRUCTURED FLEXIBILITY

Virtually all the changes described above emerged from the need for a new organizational structure which provided increased flexibility and also enlarged personal contact and availability among faculty and students. These were two sides of a coin. To increase the students' level of freedom without at the

same time providing for increased accountability and advisement would have been to step backward and run the risk of encouraging unproductive permissiveness rather than genuine freedom. The previous organizational structure of Regis had served well but had begun to crack under the pressure of new needs and aspirations. Essential was a new framework which encouraged flexibility and at the same time provided the structure which would prevent the school from slipping into confusion and chaos. The concrete changes described above were not seen as radical departures from the past but as an effort to make more comprehensive and extensive the valid insights and aspirations that had started to emerge in prior years. At the same time, there was a very definite shift--one which moved the total school process and structure much more in the direction of increased student responsibility and initiative while at the same time enlarging the framework of student accountability and faculty guidance.

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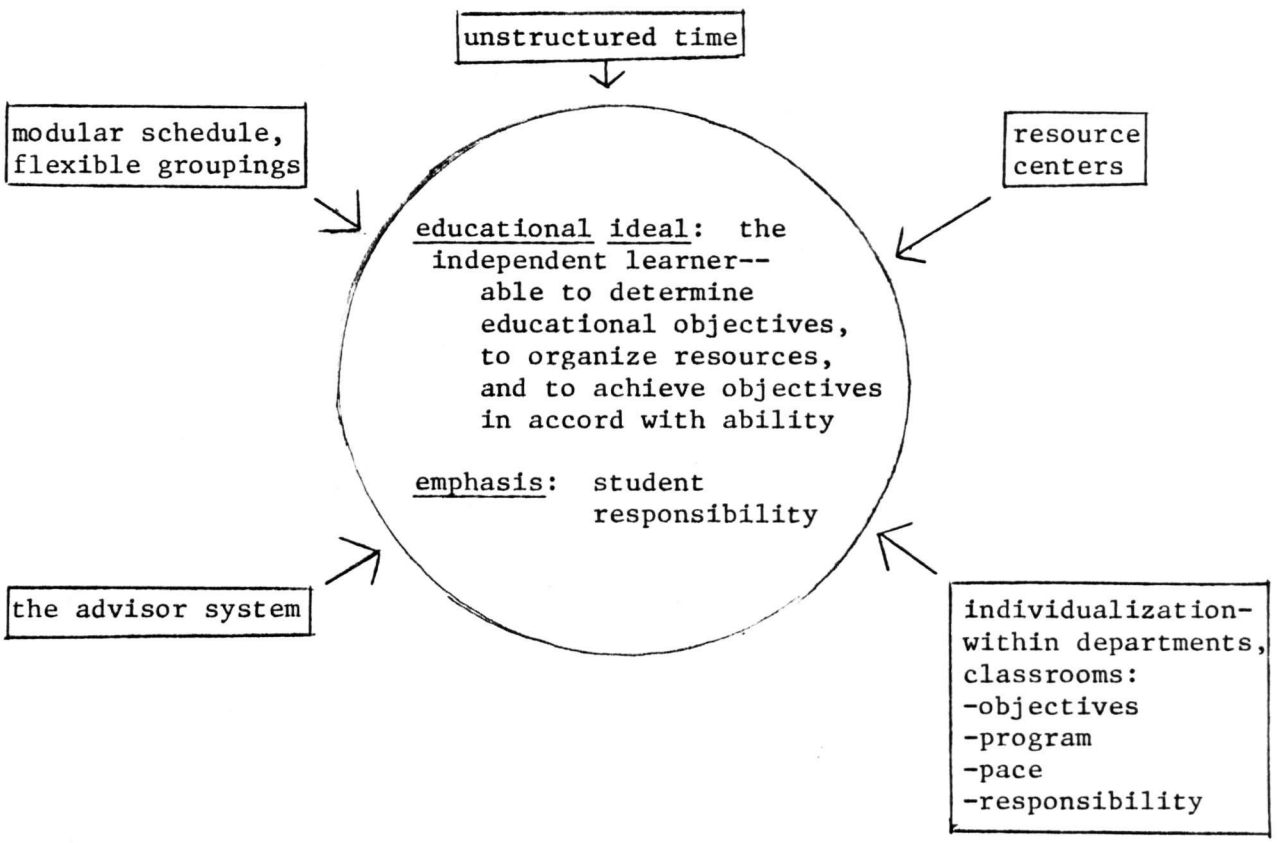
The above description of the changes planned for September, 1973 summarized the best faculty thinking as Regis began its plan for individualization. No one was certain of all of the consequences of the changes that were implemented. Any real change demanded a faculty willing to take risks. The Regis faculty realized that the changes accomplished at other innovative schools were undertaken by faculties who were willing to challenge old assumptions, to work imaginatively toward dramatically different ways of teaching, to endure the confusion and frustration that are part of any worthwhile personal or institutional change.

The faculty was also convinced that it could build a program which incorporated both the best in educational practice today and also the heritage of

the 400-year Jesuit educational tradition. To succeed, energy, enthusiasm, dedication, and willingness to change on the part of each teacher and administrator was needed. It was apparent that if, in the end, the faculty concluded that it had failed, then each teacher and administrator had to be willing to accept a part of the responsibility for that failure. The faculty began the experiment confident in itself and convinced that in the end its accomplishments would be in the same measure as its generosity, its imagination, and its determination.

THE REGIS PLAN FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION: SUMMARY DIAGRAM

The circle is viewed as the educational goal/ideal; the spokes are instrumental changes. The comments below are included as additional important elements or qualifiers.



* * *

a. a flexible ideal
b. flexibility within a structure
c. innovative in process; traditional in substance

In the center, the Regis educational ideal is illustrated: the independent learner, someone who is able to:

a) determine his own educational objectives;
b) organize the resources available to him to accomplish those objectives; and
c) complete these objectives as quickly as his talent permits.

At the heart of the concept of the independent learner is the concept of responsibility. The student, in his four years at Regis, would progress towards assuming greater responsibility for his own learning, and become at least partially self-initiating rather than always directed by his teachers.