

## RENAISSANCE COLLEGE:

# UNB's New Interdisciplinary Leadership Degree Program

by Terry R. Haggerty

In September, Renaissance College opened the doors of its Victorian mansion to its inaugural class. About two years ago, a group of ten individuals, primarily academic administrators, met informally to brainstorm about ideas that were emerging from discussions about academic renewal at the University of New Brunswick. We tossed out wide-ranging ideas typically prefaced with the statement "wouldn't it be nice if . . . ." After several stimulating sessions, we created the essential components of the Renaissance College leadership programs that exists today. For many of us, it is the program we wished we could have taken during our own university days.



### An Overview of the Program

Renaissance College is Canada's first undergraduate interdisciplinary leadership program. Through a comprehensive interdisciplinary curriculum, students undergo an intensive program - offered over three years and including two Canadian and international summer internships - designed to develop their leadership capacity. Students are exposed to a multitude of perspectives, with seminar courses in areas such as: Comparative Study of World Cultures and Religions; Natural Science, Technology and Society; Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Leadership; the Power of Images; Mathematical and Economic Approaches to Problem-Solving; Citizenship and Community Issues; and Integrative Forums. Forty percent of the courses are electives to be taken outside the College. The program values experiential learning, and defined learning outcomes form the basis for our approach to pedagogy.

Around the same time that our discussions were taking place, we learned of the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation's new grant program for "strategic investment in higher education." Its purpose was to support universities making the most substantive effort to restructure, refocus or reform their mission, governance or operations, with the ultimate aim of enhancing teaching and learning. More than thirty universities submitted proposals, and three received funding. The UNB proposal to create Renaissance College was awarded almost two million dollars over

a five-year period. This funding was absolutely crucial. Without it we could not have mounted such an ambitious program. Not only was there insufficient money in the university budget to initiate new programs, without external funding any money provided to the new program would have come from existing programs, making widespread support from other academic units unlikely.

### The Design Details

The program was framed and funded but, as the saying goes, "the devil is in the details." To decide the numerous curricular and staffing issues, we needed the involvement of faculty members, students and members of the community. Rather than adopt the traditional approach of appointing representatives from various faculties to serve on a committee, we asked all who would like to be involved in developing the program to self-select and join "Team Renaissance."

The team's first meeting was in February 1999 at 3:00 on a Friday afternoon. Approximately twenty-five people attended, some supporting the program, others ambivalent. In this first meeting the discussion was wide-ranging and the questions predictable: "Are we here to rubber stamp something the administration has already decided?" "Can we change anything in the proposal or is it written in stone?" The Dean's response: if the faculty could not support the program as it was proposed, we would either change it or drop it before wasting valuable time and effort. That first



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meeting was followed by a complimentary wine and cheese social - an idea which, in hindsight, was most valuable. Although our campus is not large, this was the first opportunity for some members of the group to talk to colleagues in other disciplines, and they found the process intellectually stimulating. The self-selected group continued to meet on Friday afternoons followed by a social. Our numbers continued to grow until, at last count, there were fifty-four names on our e-mail list.

An eight-member steering group and four curriculum groups met through that first summer. After details like course outlines, admission procedures, and policies for internships were established, the

program proposal began its journey through various academic planning committees on both the Fredericton and St. John campuses, to the Maritime Provincial Higher Education Commission (MPHEC), and finally to the Senates and Board of Governors where it received approval in November 1999, in time to accept applications for September 2000.

### The Inaugural Class

Although the program is just beginning, we believe its success will depend largely on the quality of the students and faculty involved. (Interestingly, one of the criticisms of the program is that by selecting a small group of A-level students and committed faculty members,

we have biased the “experiment” to succeed.) Our first class consists of 22 A-level learners, ranging in age from 17 to more than 50.

Our faculty of seven, referred to as “integrators”, are currently seconded to Renaissance College from such diverse academic areas as Forestry and Environmental Management, Nursing, Education, Physics, Sociology, Kinesiology, and Religious Studies. All are full professors with extensive experience in higher education. These professors will serve for approximately three years before they return to their disciplinary units - hopefully spreading some of the ideas that have proved worthwhile in Renaissance College.

## EN BREF

Le Collège Renaissance de l'Université du Nouveau-Brunswick vient de lancer le premier cours interdisciplinaire canadien (1<sup>er</sup> cycle) de leadership. Le programme intensif de trois ans comprend deux stages estivaux au Canada et à l'étranger, et met l'accent sur les acquis extrascolaires et des résultats définis d'apprentissage.

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This plan will allow some staff to advance from year to year with their students. Not only will this allow faculty members to see students complete their educational programs, it will also help us closely monitor each student's progress in developing the seven learning outcomes

### Measuring and Monitoring

From the start, we have highlighted the importance of measuring and monitoring our program and our students - to meet the program's goals, and because we are expected to do so by the funding agency, our senate, and the MPHEC.

To this end, we have developed a holistic, summary description of the attributes of Renaissance College graduates, followed by a series of seven more detailed learning outcomes.

*What is it about graduates of Renaissance College? It is how they lead - with imagination and courage. It is how they speak and write - with confidence and openness. It is how they blend what they know with abilities and their understanding of themselves and others. The comprehensive knowledge and skills-base they have honed through specially designed learning experiences give them a long reach into problems and their solutions. They have an insatiable appetite for learning. They are at home with themselves, books, paintings and computers. Finally, they are engaged with their own and others' visions of what is worth doing - questions of community, citizenship, service and obligation. What is it about graduates of Renaissance College? Firmly rooted in their understanding of the past and present, they are reflective individuals ready to meet the challenges tomorrow with insight and innovation.*

With the assistance of consultants from Alverno College, a leader in undergraduate education in the United States, we developed eight "Leadership and Learning Outcomes" for our students: discerning and decision-making, problem solving, personal well-being, multi-literacy, effective citizenship, social interaction, knowing oneself, and leadership. The descriptions of each includes a table describing criteria to guide assessment of student performance in three spheres of development: awareness, independence and interdependence.

Our educational outcomes are a part of our fundamental commitment to accountability for the best possible practice in teaching students to become effective individuals, citizens and leaders. Of course, key aspects of human existence and leadership are not suited to easy methods of assessment. We have met this challenge head on, defining outcomes like *knowing oneself and others* (where innovative work in assessment is needed) along with structured problem solving (where assessment methods are


better established). While learning outcomes are a key standard against which we measure performance, we recognize the danger of drifting into a mechanistic and rigid curriculum and the need to balance individual student interests with the broad, structured development implicit in the outcomes. We are developing traditional and digital portfolios for students to document the ways in which they have achieved each of the learning outcomes.

Our program has just started; however, we have received feedback, mostly positive, from our students. For example,

*Before I applied to Renaissance College I saw a proposed curriculum and was amazed by courses that were offered in the program. The courses are so diverse that we are learning about everything and it is all so interesting. I am exploring sides of myself that I never knew existed. So far Renaissance has been the right choice for me and I can only see it getting better.*

In a recent newspaper article (Daily Gleaner, October 11, 200) the following quote was noted:

*"It's amazing . . . it's so mentally demanding. I come out of my three hour classes and I feel like I have run a marathon."*

Needless to say, the whole process of creating a new interdisciplinary degree program that is outcomes based and values experiential learning continues to be a great challenge. We are currently in the process of completing an ethnographic research study of the whole process to develop Renaissance College. The study should provide some insights for others who embark on similar endeavours. 

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