

The Monteith Experience:
In Search of an Elusive Ethos
by
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ASSUMPTION: The most important thing that occurs at a university is learning, and the primary function of teaching is to promote learning.

QUESTION: How and why did Monteith College, devoted as it was to general education, succeed in creating an ethos that led to a “unique” experience, one that encouraged a methodology of learning substantially different in kind than that offered at many large and highly specialized institutions of higher education?

Many (perhaps most) Monteith students—while still undergraduates or subsequent to leaving the College by graduation or attrition—describe the Monteith Ethos with some-thing akin to awe, often referring to it as an epiphany, one of the defining experiences of their lives. In direct conversation or written testimonials—witness several that were posted on the Yahoo web site last year—the Monteith Experience/Ethos is reverentially invoked and often described as revelatory. Almost all graduates aver that their undergraduate experience at Monteith was superior to that received by friends at other colleges or universities. However, when pressed to identify precisely what about the Monteith Experience/Ethos made it so special, the responses are strikingly—even bewilderingly—diverse.

For many, it was the curriculum: its coherence; its interdisciplinary emphasis; its integrated and sequential nature; its pedagogy (lecture-discussion); its emphasis on imparting a broad-based body of knowledge while simultaneously emphasizing the acquisition of basic intellectual skills; its commitment to the status of general education by making it central to the undergraduate experiencing and not relegating it (for the most part) to a series of introductory-level courses taken almost exclusively during the first two years.

For some, it offered flexibility: the opportunity to pursue individual academic interests (pre-law, pre-med, etc.) by enrolling in courses offered by colleges of the University other than Monteith, as well as by Monteith; by avoiding the need to take English courses in order to certify competence in written communication, a skill emphasized in all Monteith courses; or by being “burdened” with a foreign language requirement.

For others, it offered both flexibility and freedom: the opportunity to pursue individual academic interests by taking only those courses that interested them (in or out of Monteith) without having to fulfill the requirements of a specific undergraduate major.

For still others, it offered flexibility, freedom, and independence: the opportunity to pursue individual interests—academic or otherwise, formally and/or informally (independently)—by becoming intensely engaged in the social issues of the day; by spending much of their time at the Monteith Student Center with likeminded friends; by developing and taking self-education courses; by enrolling in independent-study courses and/or becoming engaged in extra-curricular activities, some but not all of which were officially authorized.

Whatever the option, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive, virtually all who attended Monteith cite the skills of critical thinking, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and the ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing—skills acquired and honed in discussion sessions and class assignments—as crucial to their intellectual development.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, a somewhat similar range of diversity applies to members of the faculty as well. Some came to Monteith fully committed to the goals of the College. Others arrived with only a vague notion of what Monteith was about and what might be expected of them, but were eager to become engaged in the experiment. Still others remained convinced that they could function at Monteith much as they would at a traditional, discipline-oriented college or university. And a few viewed Monteith as a way station, a temporary home in which they could comfortably bide their time while seeking a more attractive professional opportunity elsewhere.

At bottom, being a Monteith faculty member was a significantly different experience than being a faculty member in a more conventional academic setting. The intellectual demands associated with designing and implementing an integrated, interdisciplinary sequence of courses, and the social pressures imposed by the collaborative curriculum planning required by Monteith's team-teaching pedagogy, were substantial. As I have noted elsewhere ("Thirty-Two years at Wayne State University: A Long and Varied Career Revisited," p. 7): "[T]he fashioning of a good Monteith faculty member was a long and arduous process, one that required considerable time and effort, but one that yielded rich intellectual rewards. Faculty members who accepted the challenge fully (not all did) became versatile and well-rounded academics. Both they and their students profited immensely from the give-and-take of an educational system in which all were joint [and active] participants."

The phrase "joint and active participants" strikes me as being particularly apt, for it embodies a notion that I believe to be at the core of the Monteith Experience/Ethos. Whether it was actually true or not, all of us—faculty members and students alike—believed that active participation (not passive acceptance) in a dynamic learning community is a central component of any successful educational enterprise.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

I don't believe that the Monteith Ethos can be defined generically. It is, rather, a singular construct, synthesized individually by every Monteith student and faculty member from a myriad of experiential snapshots, but it is a singular construct that somehow embodies elements of a collective experience. It varies substantially from one generation of Monteithers to another, and it even varies among those who attended the College at the same time. Nevertheless, every Monteith student shares some things with all other Monteith

students, though each shares more things with increasingly fewer individuals and smaller groups until each experiences something unique, something shared with no one else.

Let me attempt to clarify:

1. All Monteith students experience an entity called Monteith College and its curriculum, albeit at different times and at different moments in the College's history.
2. Groups of students who attended Monteith during a given period in the College's history collectively share some things that groups who attended the College at other periods of the College's history don't.
3. But even individuals who attended the College at the same time do not necessarily experience the same Monteith.

In the final analysis, the Monteith Experience/Ethos seems (at least in part) to be a frame of mind built from a host of experiences and memories, some collective, some individual. And it even becomes modified in retrospect, for it continues to change long after direct contact with Monteith or Monteithers has ceased. As Yates Hafner, dear friend, incomparable colleague, and inveterate comrade at arms would have it: "What IS attributable to the Monteith experience can best be answered by each individual who has passed through the curriculum [and been exposed to its ethos]. ...[T]he crucial questions are: 'What have you learned?' and 'Has it been helpful?'"

A DROLL AND QUIRKY CODA: NOT TO BE TAKEN TOO SERIOUSLY

Studies designed to measure and evaluate the impact made by a wide range of undergraduate programs decades (not years) after the fact (e.g. research results reported by Kenneth Feigenbaum) fail to reveal any significant differences attributable to the Monteith Experience/Ethos with one notable exception: Monteith students remember the names of their faculty members with much greater frequency than do their peers who graduated from other programs.