

EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATION - TOUGALOO COLLEGE

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

SEPTEMBER, 1964

Introduction and Background. During the summer of 1964, twenty-five students from northern colleges and graduate schools offered a varied program of courses, seminars, tutorials, and extracurricular cultural activities for over 250 students at Tougaloo College near Jackson, Mississippi. The program grew out of the concern of a group of graduate students at Harvard who felt that it was important to provide a means for students to enter educational work in the South. Spread only by word of mouth, the idea attracted an unusually qualified group of students and faculty members, all of whom volunteered their efforts without remuneration for some part of the summer.

A generous grant of \$15,000 from Mr. Charles A. Merrill and the Merrill Foundation put the program in a secure financial position during the early days of planning. These funds were later supplemented through a number of private donations to make up the budget of \$22,000.

Tougaloo was chosen for this project because of the opportunities offered by its unique position in Mississippi. Situated outside Jackson, it is a small, independent, liberal arts college which, by its very existence, challenges the most oppressive and humanly destructive characteristics of the deep South. It has been the only educational institution in Mississippi voluntarily operating on a non-racial basis. In a society largely governed by a deadening orthodoxy, it has preserved the individual's right to investigate problems and express ideas freely.

As far as we knew, there had been no experience with an educational program of the kind envisioned. Our general goal was to experiment with as many different approaches as possible to augment the academic life of the college. We wanted to present a varied educational program which would best convey the breadth and excitement of intellectual life to people who had been deprived of this opportunity for most of their lives. Rather than concentrate on a few limited objectives, we brought a large group onto the campus and planned diverse programs which continued to expand throughout the summer.

This comprehensive exposure to all facets of college life gave our group an unusual opportunity to experience both the major problems and the encouraging possibilities for education at a school like Tougaloo. It would be almost impossible and somewhat fruitless to try to describe in detail the activities of each member of the group. A more significant assessment of the successes and failures of the project will be revealed by specifying the fundamental difficulties of education at the college and the impact of the different activities in these problem areas.

Problems of Education at Tougaloo. The problems a teacher confronts at Tougaloo often seem to flow from inadequate secondary schooling and the extremely limited life-experience available to those at the bottom of the 'closed society.' The educator faces extraordinary difficulties in making academic material accessible and meaningful to the student. In many cases the motivation to learn is absent; in many more, the desire to develop intellectually is present but without any real conception of what learning involves and without the intellectual tools usually found in students at this level. Subjects the student has already covered

have often been mastered inadequately. The superficial, almost flippant use of technical jargon or stock interpretations hides fundamental uncertainties and confusions which make more advanced study useless. There is little ability to read rigorously or to distinguish between an analytic argument and personal opinion. The task of helping the students adequately comprehend a systematic discussion, or simply to appreciate new ideas in any form, demands painstaking care. They seem accustomed to considering new material only cursorily, retreating before novel insights and attempting to reconcile them too quickly with their own opinions through clichés. Because of this, most of the freshness, and immediacy of intellectual life is lost to them. With their critical judgment so little developed it is a constant problem to induce them to probe new ideas independently, instead of thoughtlessly parroting superficial summaries of a textbook variety or blithely accepting the views of the instructor. The narrowness of their life-experience time after time renders even the simplest references or analogies assumed in northern colleges meaningless, and the teacher is continually pressed for explanations in areas he previously thought to be almost self-evident. The students demonstrate little ability to empathize with people of different times and places or to see their own lives in historical perspective. In general, the problem here, as in the case of other deficiencies, is not simply the lack of particular substantive knowledge, but of never having known how useful or meaningful such knowledge can be.

In these circumstances, our goals became 1) to attract and intrigue the student with the excitement and aliveness of learning, 2) to show him what the mastery of a specific body of material at a high level demands, and 3) to require the extensive study of an academic field. Obviously, these objectives are interdependent and complementary and, depending on the peculiar problems of his individual students, each instructor balanced them in his own way.

The Program in Summary. There were three main spheres of the summer project - faculty grants, course instruction, and extracurricular activities.

1) The project funds enabled seven Tougaloo faculty members to pursue advanced training or independent work this summer. In a number of areas, ranging from music training at Michigan to writing a doctoral dissertation in the philosophy of history for Oxford, recipients of these grants were given the opportunity to expand their professional competence in particular fields of specialization. Although this exposure to new ideas should have an immediate effect on the quality of instruction at the college, no final assessment of this aspect of the project is possible until the faculty has returned in the fall semester.

2) Courses: The incoming staff worked with the students at three different levels.

a) The members of the summer teaching group offered twenty semester courses representing a relatively complete and balanced curriculum for the Tougaloo Summer School.¹ By assuming responsibility for these courses, the project enabled nearly half the faculty to take advantage of summer study opportunities offered through

¹The Tougaloo Summer School is divided into two five-week sessions, each equivalent to one winter semester.

our program and other special funds. In these classes the instructors covered material normally presented during the regular semester but sought, where appropriate, to introduce new approaches and new techniques within the established framework. Generally, classes were too large for effective teaching and were particularly difficult because the wide variation in the students' preparation made it impossible to develop material without boring or losing some of them. While a high proportion of the students have never heard of Hitler, a few remarkable individuals had read Plato or Kierkegaard before entering college. There was little willingness to make the necessary effort to overcome these difficulties since many students enrolled simply to complete academic requirements in the reputedly easy summer session.

b) In addition to this regular program, the group presented a series of advanced seminars in an effort to expose the better Tougaloo students to the kind of high-level, specialized courses available at larger universities. Since many of the students could not afford to stay at the college during the summer months, the project granted fifty scholarships for the first session and seventy-five for the second. In small groups - classes varied in size from two to twelve but averaged about six - the advanced students had an opportunity to work closely with their instructors in diverse fields, such as music harmony, linear algebra, comparative literature, and Russian history. These seminars in many ways magnified our perception of the discouraging difficulties and the hopeful possibilities of education at Tougaloo, because the demands made on the students were so great. Sections met from six to nine hours a week for intensive discussions, and students were expected to cover a large amount of material, often from books given to them by the project. Although complaining about the amount of work, many were surprised to find what they could accomplish in such a short period. Implicit in the challenges presented to them was a new kind of respect for their intellectual potential, to which they seemed to respond. Nevertheless, in most cases, the level of achievement was relatively low. The instructors frequently found it necessary to concentrate on the elemental principles of a discipline. Even so only the beginnings of a solid foundation for later study were attained. The elementary skills of reading carefully, writing grammatically, and presenting arguments clearly will continue to require laborious attention by their teachers. But, most important, the students developed some conception of what advanced learning requires - and had been intrigued, not frightened away from its demands.

One feature of the seminar series deserves special attention. As information about the program spread, a number of professors at outstanding universities asked to come to Tougaloo. The last three weeks of the advanced English seminar were led successively by Monroe Engel, William Alfred, and Allen Lebowitz, all members of the English Department at Harvard. Yosai Rogat, Professor of Political Science at Chicago, presented theories of legal decision-making to the seminar on constitutional law; Michael Lipton, Fellow of All-Souls College (Oxford), worked intensively with the economic development seminar; and Stanley Cavell, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard, led discussions on films that were shown to the entire college. Although none of these men remained for more than ten days of classes, their knowledge, their maturity and experience, and particularly, their informal availability to individual students created the kind of intellectual stimulation which is likely to have longterm effects.

c) As part of the Pre-Freshman Program initiated at Tougaloo this summer, the groups led nine tutorial sections. Our objective was limited to intriguing the incoming students with the variety and richness of intellectual life, rather than attempting to cover a specific body of factual material. The eighty-five high-school graduates in this program received formal instruction in reading comprehension, english composition, and geography or remedial math during the morning hours; and then, for two hours in the afternoon the students split up into groups of four to six to discuss material which they and their tutor had decided upon. Tutorials varied greatly in content and approach. At the start they were often simply discussions about life in Mississippi, as tutor and tutees got to know each other. Later, sections analyzed poetry, read plays aloud, or delved into specific academic fields.

One of the hardest problems the instructors faced was their uncertainty about what could be expected of the students. This was partially a question of the usual adjustments in implementing a new program, but the problem was complicated by the group's lack of experience in the South, and the contrasts between the existing faculty and the tutors in their methods of relating to the students. It was difficult to find the line between intriguing students to greater efforts and disciplining them to force higher output. Nevertheless, in most cases, the pre-Freshman felt the tutorials and the relationships they developed through them were a most valuable and exciting part of their program.

3) Extracurricular programs: To supplement the formal academic fare and to expose the students to other areas of cultural life, there were film programs, a concert series, and a number of play readings.

a) During the summer there were ten evenings devoted to films. Here the attempt was to stimulate the students to new social perspectives by showing movies from eight different countries, to offer a documentary introduction to some of the most significant historical events of the twentieth century, and, by discussing the film as an art form, to provide an introduction to aesthetic criticism.

b) One of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of the entire summer was the ten live concerts presented during the second session. Open to the public, these concerts continually attracted not only a large number of students but also many members of the local Jackson community, some of whom had never been to Tougaloo before. Lectures during each concert broached fundamental questions about the nature of music. But the outstanding performances enabled people with little previous exposure to classical music to respond enthusiastically to the breadth of musical literature from Bach to Schoenberg.

c) Despite the pressure of their studies, over twenty students participated for several evenings in informal play-readings of scenes from Brecht and Sartre. These were supplemented by short talks on the background of both the subject matter and techniques of modern political drama.

Success - In What Terms? It is exceptionally difficult to assess such a project. Progress toward the significant longrange goals is not easy to measure nor could a short, ten-week experience be expected to produce easily demonstrable results. One must rely on a variety of opinions and interpret these individual judgments with great care, for, in the absence of objective evidence, they will inevitably be colored by personal commitments or preconceptions. In a situation with so many emotional undercurrents, a great deal may be left unsaid.

On the whole, it would seem that the members of the project made a remarkable start in bringing new ideas to many individuals and in stimulating them to live the breadth and richness of intellectual life meaningfully and actively. How deep the impact, how long-lasting the effects, and for how many people, it is impossible to say. But, the crucial fact is that numerous students were left with the feeling of having participated in an exciting and rewarding experiment - an experience that was immediately meaningful and challenging in a positive way. From their comments, what seems to have affected the students most was the openness and respect of the instructors. To have young northern whites work closely and sympathetically with them, to be presented honestly with the opportunity and challenge of unselfconsciously sharing in the life of those who had received the best that northern university training offers - this was the unique quality that underlay all the activities of the summer. The teachers did not appear to the students simply in formal classroom surroundings but were available for informal discussions, shared their personal books and records widely, and also entered naturally into the students' own activities, ranging from sports to jazz.

Success in this area of direct human contact may well be the most significant result of the project, but it does not substitute for a realistic appraisal of specific educational achievements. Although many of the seminars covered ambitious quantities of literature and introduced the students to the methods of intensive analysis in a variety of disciplines, generally, the level of academic achievement was below what it must become if Tougaloo is to succeed in reaching accepted, national, educational standards. The task is immense and the project, as a complement to the new programs being initiated by the college, made a respectable beginning. Many students insisted they had learned more during the ten-weeks than in the preceding year of course work, and, most of the seminar participants felt they had been exposed to new approaches to learning. Instead of general textbook summaries, they were encouraged to confront the classic sources in specialized fields; instead of large lectures, they were encouraged to participate actively in small-group discussions. Although some of the pessimistic assessments of the summer's academic accomplishments are widely applicable, it is important to recognize that there was a nucleus of students who produced very encouraging work. In circumstances where weaknesses are generally so pronounced, any variations in the level of instruction provided by different departments at the college, or in the ability of the new teachers to relate meaningfully to the students, have a magnified effect in terms of the results that are possible.

The enthusiastic response of the majority of the students entails some dangers, especially for the pre-Freshman who received an exceptional amount of personal attention. After the summer's experience, the return to classes of the old style may provoke a healthy pressure for change, but it could as well heighten

an already oversensitive awareness of present inadequacies and hopelessness for the future. The gains of the project must be sustained and expanded by new efforts during the regular academic semesters.

Because the rewards obtained from the project often depended directly on the amount of individual attention received, the fact that most instructors were overloaded with heavy schedules, and were working and living in relatively difficult physical conditions, in many cases limited the group's effectiveness. This was particularly sensed by those upperclassmen taking regular summer school courses because the program provided for much more formal and informal contact between members of the group and the pre-Freshmen. This relative concentration of attention was increased by the feeling of many instructors that the pre-Freshmen were more open and responsive to new experiences than the older students. Some jealousy and sensitivity arose which might be prevented by more balanced programming in the future.

Before the summer there had been a great deal of concern over the possible frictions caused by such a large number of northern whites entering a southern Negro campus in positions of authority. In general, there was little tension in interpersonal relations. The students were amazingly open and accepting, given the kind of social contact with whites that Mississippi normally provides. During the spring, many members of the faculty cooperated in designing the seminar program and Dr. Townsend, Director of the Pre-Freshman Program, was particularly helpful and perceptive in utilizing the group's talents most effectively in the college community. The administration was always considerate of the many demands that were made on it for deviations from normal procedures, and, in most cases, was able to facilitate the requested changes. Almost everyone on campus was sufficiently impressed with the achievements of the project that they felt similar efforts should be continued in the future.

Among the extracurricular activities, the concert series was without doubt an outstanding success. The presence of young musicians on campus communicated an unusual sense of the aliveness of serious music, and the inclusion of student performers in a number of pieces demonstrated to Mississippians the real possibilities for creative participation in this area of western culture.

The movie series was a more qualified success. Many of the films were literally too foreign to the students' experience and all but a few failed to perceive each director's unique artistic qualities or sensitive human insights. Our goal in this area, as in many others, was to help the students develop their capacities for self-conscious, critical judgment. This could probably have been achieved just as effectively had we succeeded in getting them to think about examples of the accepted popular culture rather than having them consider more esoteric products.

The experience with films points to a central difficulty in teaching at Tougaloo which, with care, can be handled constructively. Many intellectual concerns seem extremely remote from the lives of Mississippi Negroes, yet the methods, if not always the content, of most disciplines can be applied to their own experience. Bach may be too formal and distant, but the exercise of musical judgment about jazz, or rock-and-roll, is possible. In the social sciences, the

new involvement in the civil rights movement presents a crucial sphere in which analytic insights are immediately relevant. The danger in relating material to events close at hand is that personal experience and personal opinion may be accepted as a surrogate for the need to press toward new understanding. But the sensitive teacher, if he can help the student to reassess those conditions which are closest to him, may be much more successful in leading him to approach western intellectual thought as a living, exciting experience within which one can develop both individually and socially.

Recommendations:

a) General.

- 1) The summer seminar project should be continued in the future but with serious consideration given to the following modifications and proposals.
- 2) Intensive efforts must be made to preserve and develop the temporary successes by integrating and coordinating the program with the winter semesters' curriculum. Without this continuity, too many of the summer's gains will be lost.
- 3) The emphasis and energies of the summer instructors should be concentrated on the pre-Freshmen tutorials and the advanced seminars.
- 4) There should be greater coordination between the formal course-work of the pre-Freshmen and the tutorials. It may be more effective to carry out some of the remedial efforts in reading and composition within the context of tutorials or seminars. In this way the student's energy and attention is less divided and the development of these skills is immediately relevant.
- 5) Consideration should be given to offering a number of courses preparing students for further study in Law and perhaps also in Medicine, Nursing, Engineering, etc.
- 6) Instructors should have smaller course loads to enable them to work more intensively with individual students.
- 7) The participation of faculty members from northern universities for periods as short as a week can be valuable, but they should preferably come early in the program so that their new and different approaches can be developed in classes throughout the summer.
- 8) Thought should be given to drawing students to the advanced programs from throughout the South.
- 9) The pre-Freshmen and upper classes should be brought into closer contact through some joint seminars and informal activities.

10) Work and study facilities for students and faculty must be improved. This does not necessarily require new buildings but simply a better allocation of existing space (such as the dining hall), the extension of library hours, and the relatively inexpensive improvement of some rooms with air-conditioning.

b) Administrative Details.

- 1) A project of this size needs one person who can spend at least half-time handling administration and publicity.
- 2) The general design of the courses and activities for the summer must be prepared and cleared by the administration in the early spring, and information about the program spread to potential participants at that time.
- 3) Some formal application procedure for scholarship funds and admission to advanced seminars is necessary in order to use the available resources most effectively.
- 4) Credit should be offered for those advanced seminars acceptable to the various departments of the college. A means to facilitate the entry of these course hours on the students' transcripts must be designed.
- 5) The existence of a large paperback library specifically for the pre-Freshmen was valuable, but greater control over the circulation of the books will be necessary to prevent loss and to keep them available for general use.