



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN • WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

INQUIRERE: A Program for Enhancing Academic Growth

Traditionally, independent study is designed for the junior and, preferably, the senior level of undergraduate study, while sophomores are encouraged to "watch." However, applying one's knowledge and abilities should be encouraged at any stage of education. At Waldorf College, a two-year liberal arts college where sophomores are our "seniors," we have developed a program for motivating sophomores (and sometimes freshmen) to apply and to demonstrate their academic achievements.

Athletics and the fine arts have always provided Waldorf students with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in traditional academic disciplines. Such opportunities make these areas exciting by bringing the students out of the classrooms and into the public arena.

In the spring of 1988, two biology students completed separate, independent study projects which were conceptually excellent and achieved significant results. I was impressed not only by what the students learned, but also that they had begun to discover about learning and, specifically, biology. The students were excited about their success, but the college had no forum for presenting such academic achievements. Consequently, we reserved our large lecture hall for an evening Science Seminar and invited the college community and the public. The audience was small, but some key individuals attended, including the science faculty and a number of college administrators. They were impressed by these students' presentations and by the concept of public presentation of students' scholarly work.

The following year, we created the INQUIRERE program to give capable and motivated students from across the curriculum a forum to publicly demonstrate their academic achievements. INQUIRERE is a multifaceted, interdisciplinary program which provides not only a public forum for our students and enhances the intellectual life of the campus, but also involves the college and surrounding communities in the careful consideration of issues of national and global concern.

The first aspect of INQUIRERE highlights student achievement. When students register for spring classes,

interested and capable sophomores are encouraged to register for independent study. They consult with an advisor in the discipline of their choice and then begin to research a topic for study. They consult often with their advisors, but independent work is stressed. Then, during INQUIRERE Week in late April, these students present the results of their individual studies in a seminar format on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday evenings. Faculty engaged in research also present seminars, thus promoting an atmosphere of collegiality with the students. Time limits for the individual presentations, including time for questions, are 20 minutes for students and 30 minutes for faculty. Students are challenged to stay within this time limit, but can do so with careful preparation and coaching by their advisor. Recognition is given to the individual advisors by asking each to introduce his/her student.

At first, we were concerned whether sophomores would be prepared for an examination of this degree, but we have been overwhelmingly pleased with the topics chosen by our students, by the quality of their work, and by the maturity of their presentations. Our students have researched and presented papers on "Music Works: History and Performance"; "Russian Icons"; "Documentary Photography: Life After Retirement"; "Effects of Pheromones on Gerbil Memory"; "Musical Composition: Freedom Through Restriction"; "Hair Structure: An Application of Forensic Science"; "Backyard Pollution in Iowa"; and "Applying Computers to Education," among others. Students show a great interest in and an ownership of their individual topics. Generally, they stimulate interest among their peers, faculty, and the audience; and they handle questions well.

A second aspect of our present INQUIRERE encourages college and community interaction with distinguished scholars on current issues. On Thursday morning, scholars with divergent views address an all-college convocation. That evening, they convene for a moderated forum that engages the college and the community in active participation.

In 1989, we invited a theologian and a neurologist (both Christian) and a scientist (an atheist) to discuss



the relationships between science and religion. In 1990, in conjunction with Earth Day, we invited an ecologist, a historian/theologian, and an agricultural economist to discuss wealth distribution and resource stewardship. In 1991, in conjunction with the two-hundredth anniversary of the Bill of Rights, we plan to invite scholars to discuss the First Amendment.

This aspect of INQUIRERE, besides being popular and attracting citizens from the local community and beyond, has the added element of being festive. The guests are present on campus throughout the day and attempts are made to acquaint them personally with students, faculty, and administration. The visitors are present for an informal luncheon in the Campus Center; faculty are encouraged to invite them to address afternoon classes; and prior to the evening forum, participating students, faculty, and community dignitaries are invited to a banquet honoring these scholars. The banquet is informal and designed for the visitors to mix with the college and community members. A brief program introduces each scholar in a light, personal way. Finally, after the evening forum, a faculty reception at the Waldorf President's residence honors the visiting scholars, the faculty, student scholars, and their advisors.

We have been careful to design INQUIRERE as a positive encouragement. Student scholars are not graded for their presentation, per se; their advisors grade them for their independent studies. Instead of a grade, a faculty committee constructively evaluates their presentation. Presenters are also videotaped and encouraged to review their presentation.

Not every sophomore is interested in or prepared for participation in INQUIRERE, nor is independent study/INQUIRERE intended for every sophomore. Although INQUIRERE was designed for any motivated and capable student, it is often an attraction for the honors students. Although other students do present at INQUIRERE, it is primarily utilized by the Honors Program. We are careful not to equate INQUIRERE with the Honors Program, even though INQUIRERE currently depends almost entirely upon the willing participation of honors students. It is intended to attract the participation of any capable student who has successfully completed an independent study course and to encourage intellectual curiosity and growth among all students.

INQUIRERE has become one of the academic highlights of the year. Students are beginning to plan ahead for their independent study topics, and faculty are beginning to ask what the next INQUIRERE theme will be. Most important, we have begun to realize the

scholarly potential of our sophomores. They are not yet seniors, but they are developing an attribute prized even at the senior level—the ability to think and to express that thinking effectively in a public setting.

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September 6, 1991, Vol. XIII, No. 18
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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms. ISSN 0199-106X.