

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ORAL HISTORY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN¹

by Glenn Brooks

Editor's Note: The year 1968 was a turbulent year in United States history and United States education. There was real ferment among college and university students, both at Colorado College and elsewhere. Students were concerned about foreign policy, the Vietnam War, the shift to co-ed living in college and university dormitories, and a whole host of other new ideas on how to organize and operate higher education.

In the fall of 1968, Political Science Professor Glenn Brooks was named a special assistant to college President Lloyd Edson (Lew) Worner to analyze the Colorado College program and curriculum and look for areas for improvement. In this edited version of an oral history, Professor Brooks revealed the original thinking and planning that resulted in the development of the Colorado College Block Plan.

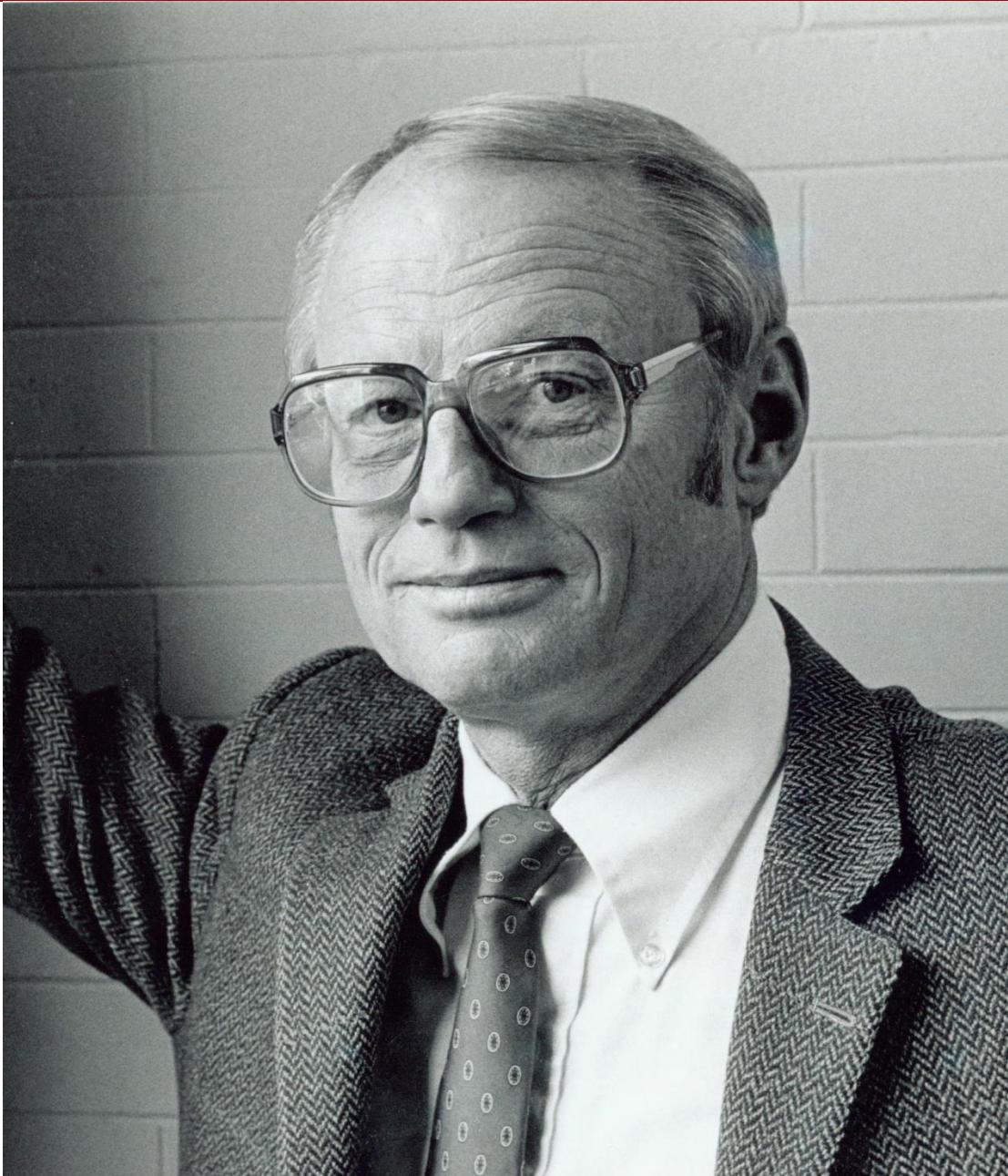
The Colorado College Block Plan probably couldn't have happened, and happened so fast, if it had not been the late 1960s. The culture of the time was very much in favor of change in education.

There were all sorts of experiments in higher education all over the country, and as [subsequent] Colorado College President Gresham Riley liked to point out, there were only two experiments that appear to have survived from those early years. One was the Brown University Plan (the advisor plan at Brown). The other was the Block Plan at Colorado College.

It was something Gresham liked to talk about.

¹ Glenn Brooks Oral History, February 14, 1996, Special Collections, Tutt Library, 17-27. The Colorado College Oral History Project was conducted by Judith Reid Finley.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN



GLENN BROOKS

He conducted the major study of the Colorado College academic program that resulted in the implementation of the Block Plan at the College at the beginning of the 1970-1971 academic year. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

How did the Block Plan come about? I had gone off to Africa for the academic year 1967-1968. The Committee on Committees, which is now the Faculty Executive Committee, was aware that 1974 was going to be the centennial year of the College, and they thought it would be a good idea to get a leg up on that.

And Fred Sonderrmann, in fact, was chairing the Committee on Committees that year that I was gone. And so they talked about the desire of setting up some kind of group to take a look at ourselves and see where we were going to go in the next century.

I guess since I was out of town, they said, "Well, let's get Brooks to do something on this."

I came back in late August, 1968, and Lew Worner, then President Worner, and Fred asked me if I would head up some kind of a group to take a look at ourselves and think ahead to the year 1974.

Things had been fragmentary. We were looking at grading systems, or specific changes in degree requirements, something of that sort.

And so, here we were, in an atmosphere that was conducive to a lot of change. I had gone off to Africa partly to get some perspective. The Vietnam War was taking place, and things were happening in American culture, and it was all very unsettling to all of us in those years. And I thought it was a good idea to get away for a year.

The Rockefeller Foundation offered me an assignment for a year in Nairobi, at University College - Nairobi. So I came back, uncertain as to just how I would feel about going back into a liberal arts college in the United States. The nation was still racked by the war issue and the cultural changes that were going on.

But one thing that my experience in Africa convinced me of was that, for better or worse, I was an American. It was not for me to go and save Africa, or something of that sort. It was, in fact, a very appropriate and honorable profession to be teaching at an undergraduate liberal arts college like Colorado College.

So we started talking about how to go about this activity, this review, this reflection on what we were going to be, and what we had been.

And I proposed that, instead of setting up a committee, the college should operate more like a committee of the whole. The faculty should get as many people involved as it could. A lot of that was pretty innocent, I suppose.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

I wanted this populist approach to changing the College - and to reflection about the College.

But what we did, and Lew Worner embraced this idea, was to make use of different committees, and different groups, according to what kind of thing we were taking a look at. So the faculty Academic Program Committee got involved in a department-by-department review of what the faculty needed. And we put a pretty positive spin on it. What do you need to do a better job?

It's very important to say that Colorado College got into this process of change in a pretty upbeat way. There was no atmosphere of crisis.

There was no atmosphere of financial or educational or ideological decay or anything of that sort. There was no interest in changing our fundamental direction or to become a more vocationally oriented institution. The whole emphasis was on how to do a better job of traditional liberal arts and sciences.

The strength of that commitment was almost universal in the College. There might have been a few soreheads here and there who wanted more technical stuff, more vocational stuff. But that was one of the things that I think made the change possible. We were really focused on how to do a better job of what we were already doing. We were not arguing, as many institutions were at that time, on whether we should change our direction in some way.

So, we went around - we meaning myself and members of the Academic Program Committee - talking to departments, getting questionnaire materials from departments, and responses to what they needed. And then we started going out into the dormitories, and the student association began to get more into this.

And that was when we had, for the faculty, some real reality checks. The faculty discovered what life was like in the residence halls. Nobody had understood the effects of a loud stereo system on life in Loomis Hall, or any other dormitory.

And one of the things that this review with faculty and students began to reveal very quickly was that people felt pulled apart by the conventional semester system. They were jumping from one place to another and doing too many things.

Then there developed a fairly quick - I won't call it a consensus - but a dominant point of view. There ought to be a better way to organize ourselves. Our discussions did not challenge the content of the curriculum.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN



LLOYD EDSON (Lew) WORNER

Worner was the only graduate of Colorado College to serve as President of Colorado College. It was President Worner who responded positively to Professor Fred Sondermann's suggestion that the 100th anniversary of the College be used for a study of the College rather than only a celebration. It was Worner who appointed Glenn Brooks to make that study. Worner maintained studied neutrality at the faculty meetings at which the Block Plan was considered and adopted, but he worked hard behind the scenes in behalf of the Block Plan. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

It began to focus on time structure and other organizational issues. And fairly quickly, some people began to come forward with ideas. Don Shearn, in the Psychology Department, said, "Why don't you just give me 15 students, and let me work with them?"

Working with 15 students at one time would replace jumping around from class to class and dealing with 150 to 200 students a semester all throughout the semester?

And Bill Gateley, in the Math Department, ever the good technical analyst, began to draw little pictures of how you could put things in boxes, and so on.

And all of this was happening in the fall of 1968, from September to December. These ideas just began to take shape so quickly, and they were drawn from faculty and students in a genuine way. This was not a put-up job. Nobody came into this with any idea that we were going to have a fairly major change in the structure of the academic program. Yet the ideas started flowing in.

My job was to try to paste those together in some form that made sense. I started using the term "Unified Learning," but I did not know what it meant. It was sort of Don Shearn's basic point: "Give me 15 students, and let me work with them."

And I presented those ideas to the Dean, George Drake, and to the President, Lew Worner, in either late November or early December of 1968.

I'd been reading Peter Drucker's book entitled *Effective Executives*, which was about Drucker's idea of how executives managed their time by blocking their time.

So one thing I insisted on with Lew Worner and George Drake, when I made this original presentation, was that we meet up in Lew's office with no phone calls and no interruptions until we had talked this thing out.

That was the seminal idea, and I emphasize that it really came from the grass-roots of the faculty and students. The real cause was the students responding or commenting on their feeling fractured and torn up.

There's another part of this that perhaps helped it along, helped it move, and that was that we really were looking beyond just the academic program. We were asking questions about how residential life and extracurricular life could be connected in some more creative way, instead of having everything just separate, and the parts never dealing with each other.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN



DON SHEARN

The story is that Professor of Psychology Don Shearn, Glenn Brooks, and Professor of Political Science Timothy Fuller went to have a drink at a local bar. It was during this little get-together that Professor Shearn asked his famous question: “Why don’t you just give me 15 students, and let me work with them?” (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

Later on, in the spring of 1969, the idea took shape more as the Colorado College Block Plan, with three legs of a tripod. The academic program was the biggest leg. But the other two legs were (1) what we called the leisure program, embodying the whole of extracurricular life, and (2) the residential program.

There was also the idea, developed rather innocently, that these three parts would all reinforce each other in some grand productive way.

Then there was the job of trying to iron out the technical aspects of it. We needed to find out if there were enough classrooms to offer classes of differing length and limited size simultaneously.

Could you, in fact, manage a modular schedule, with courses of differing length running simultaneously? That part got to be a lot of fun, because we got academic departments to mock up some course schedules. This was something that brought the reality of the Block Plan home

And some academic departments did it happily, and some did it grudgingly. And there were, at that time, some divisions developing between the departments.

Business and Economics was dug in, not intractably, but showing some resistance to it. The Political Science Department, as well as the Psychology Department, was pretty much in support of the idea.

But at that time we were really dealing with the technical parts, the feasibility questions. Could it really be done?

And I spent the summer of 1969 working with a lot of other people, including Judy Finley and Elaine Freed, to analyze some of the technical problems. And by and large, I think we got those worked out.

We put out a series of three big memos that summer, too, to the faculty. The memos really outlined all the facets of the proposed Block Plan.

I did not have a whole lot of vacation that summer. I started out in the fall of 1968 with a regular teaching load. I think by the spring of 1969 I got released from one course. And it was about the same for that following year of 1969-1970. I was given a reduction of one or two courses.

But it was not just me. A lot of other people did this. We just took it out of our hides and did it. And there was not a great argument about how much released time people were going to get to produce change. I think that's kind of a knee-jerk response now.

We just did it, because it seemed like an exciting thing to do.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

The 1969 Faculty Fall Conference was a very important time. It had been one year since this inquiry began. The inquiry was now converted to a proposal that was a plan of action. The faculty had the technical information about whether it was feasible to do it. The real question was whether they liked it or not.

And, at about that time, some of the faculty members began to come forward with some perfectly sensible alternatives.

And the main one of these was the Jane Cauvel, Glenn Gray, Douglas Fox, and Douglas Mertz proposal. I may have left somebody out of that list, but a group of senior faculty sat down and worked out an alternative proposal. And I worked with them, trying to bring it up to the same level of technical detail that would be required to put it in operation.

So at that time, we had the basis for making some real choices. There was a feeling on the part of some people that the Block Plan proposal was being bulldozed into adoption a little bit. The Cauvel-Gray-Fox-Mertz alternative plan was very helpful in countering that feeling. The Academic Program Committee was involved in this as well, and that enabled people to see that there were some real choices here.

But I come back to the point that there was a readiness for change. There were very few people who were opposed to any kind of a change at all. Something was going to happen.

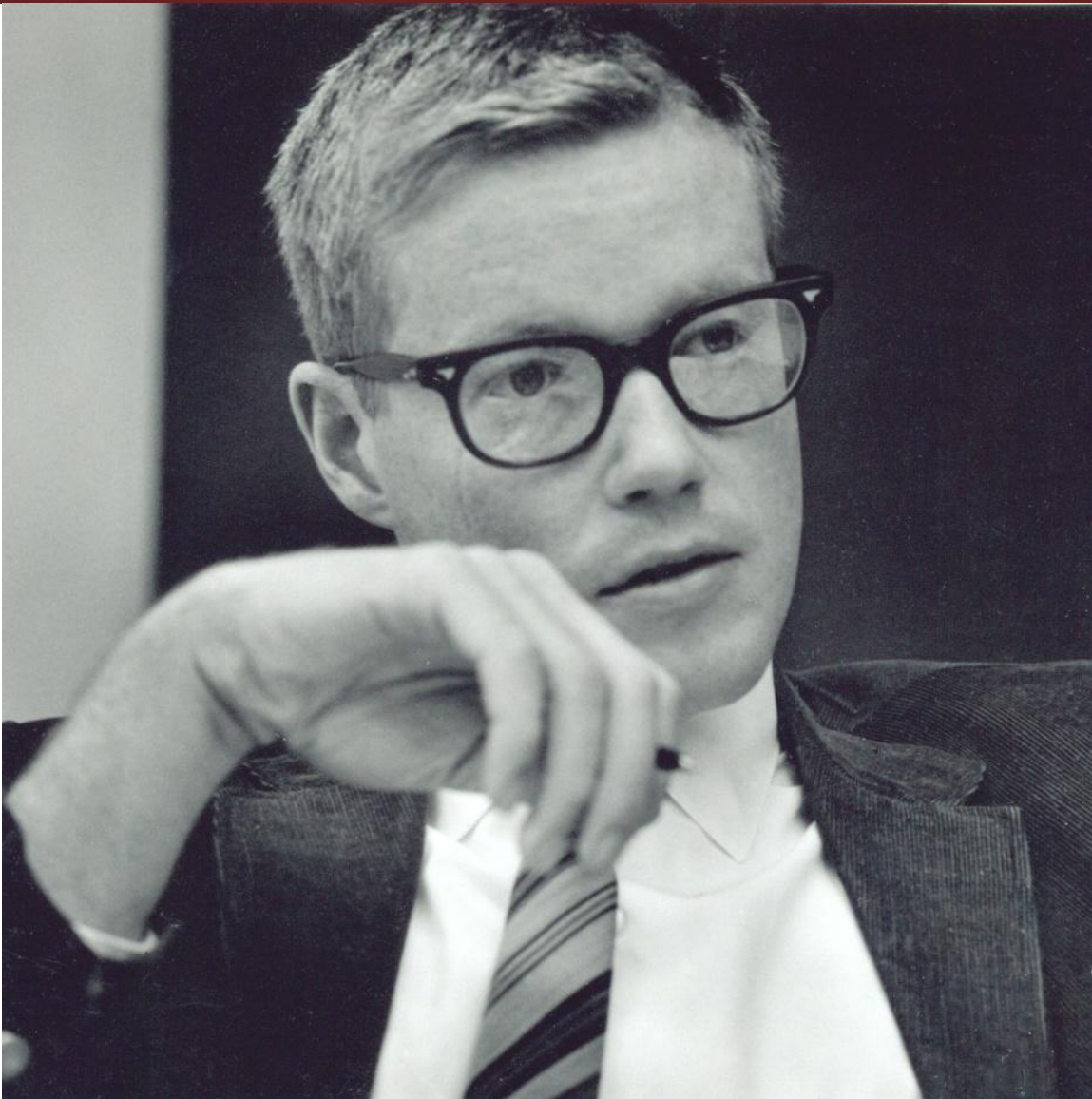
The question then was just whether it was going to be the Block Plan or some other alternative plan, mainly the Cauvel-Gray-Fox-Mertz Plan.

Were there pressures? That's right! There were some tensions. I don't mean to suggest that this was all sweetness and light. I did give the fall 1969 opening convocation address at President Worner's request, and I laid out the rationale for the Block Plan.

And some faculty members, and I particularly recall Doug Fox, wrote me scathing notes saying that I had greatly overstated the case, and that I was propagandizing. I had used the word "Draconian" in referring to the constraints of the old semester system. Doug Fox thought that was a terrible abuse of the word Draconian. It probably was.

So I was out on the point and in the line of fire. And I certainly could have done better in the way I approached selling the Block Plan. But by that time I had become a believer, and I was pushing hard for the Block Plan.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN



GEORGE DRAKE

George Drake had just been named the academic Dean at Colorado College when Glenn Brooks began the College study and evaluation that resulted in the adoption of the Block Plan. Drake worked hard along with Glenn Brooks to win faculty approval of the Block Plan. Several years later, George Drake left Colorado College to become President of Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

And we were working the precincts, talking to the different departments, and identifying the pro and con voters. We were counting votes, if you will.

And then, in an interim faculty meeting before the big vote on the Block Plan, we were having some discussion. I had so many things going on in my head at that time. I foolishly took a tape recorder with me. And I wasn't hiding it. It was just maybe a bad example of, as one of my old professors said, "Invention is the mother of necessity."

I had gotten this tape recorder, thinking it would be useful, and so I took it with me. Paul Kutsche stood up, in his six-foot, three-inch, righteous indignation, and said, "Is the faculty aware that Professor Brooks is tape recording this meeting?"

And of course, I just felt like a bowl of oatmeal at that point, because I instantly realized it was a big mistake. I had it sitting right in front of me, propped up. I immediately turned the tape recorder off, and destroyed the tape, or something like that happened to it.

And then things calmed down a little. Then not too long thereafter we had the big meeting.

The big vote on the Block Plan came October 27, 1969. What do I recall about that day? Well, I recall being pretty tired. And George Drake and I sat down and tried to do a final vote count. We were guessing, going through the whole faculty, and knowing that almost everybody would be there. And we hit it almost dead on - on the numbers. The Block Plan was passed by the faculty by 58 percent.

It was a good and spirited debate. One of the more memorable moments, I remember, was when Bob Stabler got to his feet. He was a senior professor in the Biology Department. "Well, let's let these young bucks do what they want to do. Give them a chance." He said words to that effect. And it was a good debate. The alternatives were all voiced, I think, pro and con.

And the vote came through, and it was clear that the Block Plan had been approved.

And President Worner stood up and said to the faculty, "Well, what does this mean? What shall we do now?"

Ray Werner in the Economics Department had been one of the leading opponents of the plan. He had been a very effective and very articulate opponent of the plan. He stood up and said, "Mr. President, it's clear to me that

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

this plan has the very substantial support of the faculty, and I move that we implement it."

The vote on Ray Werner's motion was virtually unanimous. I remember a visiting professor in the Economics Department, who was here for a short time, voted against it. And there may have been another couple of fugitive votes. But, at that point, the battle was over, and people felt they'd had a fair shake, and it had all worked out.

I want to emphasize that this was a collective operation. I've talked about the Academic Program Committee, and I've talked about students involved in it. Good Lord! We had the students working with us. This was the time of the rebellious group known as Students for a Democratic Society. Columbia University and the University of California at Berkeley were virtually falling apart because of student protests against college and university administrators.

And we had radical students involved in working on this plan, as well as a lot of square students, because they had a sense that something was going to happen. And they liked that idea, and they were going in and testing these mock-up schedules and so on. And I'm not aware of any significant student resistance to the change.

It brings me back once again to the point that this probably couldn't have happened if there hadn't been such an atmosphere of change, educational and cultural change, in the society.

The development of the Block Plan began on September 1, 1968, which was the starting point. At that time we had no idea what we were going to do, whether we were going to change anything at all, or just do a self-study. We advanced to the formulation of a plan, to working out the technical details, and then to a phase of politicking it through. Alternative plans were considered, and then a final vote put the Block Plan into action. The entire process took only 13 months.

In the spring of 1970, I was involved in getting the whole thing organized for registration, preregistration, course rooms, etc. At that time, we called my office the planning office. Yes, I did continue to teach, but with a reduced number of courses.

And a lot of students were involved. Malcolm Ware, and some really good dedicated students, were working on figuring out how to furnish classrooms. They were raiding Salvation Army and Goodwill stores for old

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

sofas that would serve as places for people to sit. We wanted to create lounges in the residence halls that we could use for classes.

It was a real shoestring operation, and initially the College spent very little money in making the conversion. Down the road, some more money came in. The Ford Foundation gave the College a nice grant, and we were able to start fixing things up.

But at first, it was very much just a do-it-yourself baling-wire kind of approach. And that was fun. It was not always very carefully worked out, or systematic, but we just kind of charged ahead.

I would give a great deal of credit to the people who opposed the plan, and to those who favored the alternative plan. They were people like Jane Cauvel and Glenn Gray and Doug Fox and Doug Mertz and others. We never had a real disagreement, except for people getting mad at me for my fall 1969 convocation speech.

It didn't get personal. Maybe for some people it did, and I never knew about it, but I'm not aware of any situations in which people were refusing to speak to each other because of positions they took pro or con on the Block Plan.

Course registration for the Block Plan was mostly done by hand. One thing that was a lot of fun was when we had a mock registration. Students worked to turn out the student body. There were balloons, and prizes, and all sorts of goofy things to get the students involved. It gave the Block Plan a serious test run.

And it worked. A fantastic percentage of the students did the mock registration, and we learned a lot from that. But the one thing I remember is it just being pure fun. And that helped to solve some of the problems. By the time we went into the real registration and started classes on Labor Day, 1970, we were ready.

When it came to adapting our old semester courses to the brand-new Block Plan, I think most of us poured old wine into the new bottles. We still continued to lecture more than we admitted to. I still walk by classrooms in Armstrong Hall or in Palmer Hall, and who do I hear talking? I hear my dear professorial colleagues talking. So the changes were not so drastic as some people make them out.

Nevertheless, I think the most successful teachers were those who started making some real changes, such as varying the pace of their courses from week to week and day to day. They gave more time for small-group

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

work, more time for student presentations, and held more class discussions. One of the great things was that, then and now, the professors really could expect students to be prepared for their work.

The students were more likely to have read the material in advance, which was not true under the semester system. Students still get away with coming to class unprepared, but it is less likely with the Block Plan.

Class attendance went up to almost 100 percent, and it has stayed very high. Under the old semester system, maybe class attendance was two-thirds or three-fourths as a normal average.

The failure rate dropped dramatically in the first year of the Block Plan, and we think that had something to do with the ability of students to focus on their work. And the professors were more able to spot problems.

And let's stay on that run for a minute. The returns are pretty clear now that the Block Plan did *not* do much to improve the amount of information that got stuffed into students' heads. What it did do was give students skills of concentration and self-discipline. They gained the ability to get their work done. That in my mind stands out as one of the really distinctive merits of the Block Plan.

I remember Lorna Lynn, who is now a doctor of internal medicine at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. She said that when she got to medical school, she had a process for getting her work done. And she said she was in action from day one, while other new medical students were sitting around for the first two or three weeks kind of figuring out what they were going to do.

And I hear that again and again and again.

But for all of its problems, and its flaws, I think the Block Plan has done some good things for students, and that's the main objective.

There were some problems with the Block Plan, but they came from our innocence about what would happen. For example, the Block Plan had Block Breaks built into it, and some of the faculty members, myself included, imagined that during the Block Breaks we would hold seminars and sit around and discuss Plato, or the Cuban revolution, or whatever. And the students had a rather different attitude!

And indeed, so did the faculty! The faculty had to go off at Block Break and grade papers and get ready for the next block. The students wanted to go skiing or bicycling or whatever else they had in mind.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLOCK PLAN

And so the Block Breaks in the Block Plan took on a very different character from what some of us had envisioned. It was not all heavy intellectual pursuit, that's for sure. So that was one thing that was just different from what we had planned.

And then there is the Leisure Program. Today we seem to have a whole bureaucracy of staff people built around the Leisure Program. But in the early days of the Block Plan, there was no staff. Faculty members and students and a few administrators were working and running the Leisure Program.

We didn't add a whole lot of stuff. Actually, the Leisure Program was just a matter of seeing how the parts fit together in the extracurricular life of the College.²

² After reviewing this oral history some four decades after the adoption of the Block Plan at Colorado College, Glenn Brooks wrote to the editor: "I'm glad that the text emphasizes the fact that there was no atmosphere of crisis at Colorado College when we did this change. Lew [President Lloyd Worner] trusted the faculty's ability to come up with something useful - a better way to do what we have traditionally done. [Lew] said that if changes were academically desirable, he would seek ways to make them financially feasible. That's remarkable, isn't it?"



THE GRAVES OF LLOYD AND MARY WORNER

Lloyd Edson (Lew) Worner and Mary Haden Worner are buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs. (Photograph by Robert D. Loevy.)