

Liberal Arts and Sciences in Academia: A Case Study and Tribute

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Liberal arts colleges have notable success introducing and educating students about contemporary thinking in global contexts. It takes a talented faculty committed to a liberal arts and sciences education to enable this success. Colorado College alumni will likely agree with these statements. However, small liberal arts colleges are often challenged to provide a full breadth of knowledge for effective teaching despite their advantages over larger institutions. For example, psychology at Colorado College was part of a Philosophy and Psychology Department until 1931 as at many universities during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 1929-30 CC Catalog, two professors comprised the Department of Philosophy and Psychology, one taught six of the seven psychology courses, and the other taught all six courses offered in philosophy and one in psychology. When Dr William Arthur Blakely was hired in 1931, psychology became a separate department, and he was its main professor for many years despite growing academic developments of psychology as a science to describe and predict behavior.

At Colorado College, the decision-makers (administrators) saw the importance of providing more depth in the field of psychology and hired four professors between 1956 and 1962 during the term of President Benezet. These four remained at CC for almost 35 years: Doug Freed came in 1956 (Ph.D., Minnesota), Carl Roberts in 1957 (Ph.D., Missouri), Don Shearn in 1961 (Ph.D., Indiana), and Gilbert Johns in 1962 (Ph.D., Indiana). These professors were the core psychology faculty setting the stage for the study of psychology as a natural science requiring rigorous empirical support as evidence for its hypotheses about behavior. Students were attracted to the common theme adopted by the foursome who worked together for so long, which led to an eight-fold increase in the number of majors from three in 1960 to 25 in 1990.

With the recent passing of Carl Roberts (April 2, 2021) and Gilbert Johns (May 5, 2021) and the death of Doug Freed in 2013, only Don Shearn remains to give us insights about the spirit of the original foursome that emphasized empirical evidence in the study of behavior. By 1962, each professor specialized in a different area of psychology: Doug Freed was trained as a clinical psychologist; Carl Roberts was an expert on learning; Don Shearn was a physiological psychologist (a neuroscientist in today's academic world); and Gilbert Johns was interested in

sensory systems as well as the history of psychological science. They each were productive scholars in their specialties, publishing and presenting papers in excellent journals and at high-quality scientific meetings. From that time, student projects have also been published and presented at academic conferences. Over the 60 years from 1960 to 2020, additional professors with other specialty areas have been added to better represent psychological science, such as Developmental Psychology, Neuroscience, and Social Psychology. Today's Psychology Department has nine tenure-track professors who all value the academic approach of the original four reflecting international developments in the field of psychology.

State-of-the-art laboratories for student learning and research were developed in the 1960s by the foursome, sometimes using personal resources and sometimes through grants. By 1963, all students who took Introduction to Psychology at CC completed a laboratory that involved conditioning a rat (or pigeon) by training the animal to make specific responses using food reinforcement (rewards) that resulted in predictable patterns of behavior. One alumna told us that the labs in which she trained a rat to make a series of desired responses was the most valuable lesson learned in four years at CC because she had applied the principles to many cases she dealt with as a social worker in New York City. Recent alumni who took the Psychology 101 block will likely recall this lab assignment. The photo shows how an upper-level Comparative Psychology class in 1964 designed and carried out a project on learning by a giraffe at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. As predicted, the giraffe responded like other animals.



Almost as soon as the foursome arrived in the early 1960s and despite their varied interests, a common theme was developed for the Department centered on behaviorism, a popular approach among experimental and some clinical psychologists at the time. This provided a core theme for the teaching of psychology for several years. The reputation of the CC

Psychology Department as a leading school teaching this approach was such that the well-known psychologist, B.F. Skinner, behaviorism's chief proponent, spent a week at CC as a visiting scholar in 1964 giving lectures, meeting students and faculty, and observing how CC taught the principles of behaviorism.

It might be an understatement to say that some of the concepts of behaviorism were not popular among some at CC, especially faculty in the humanities. This led to lively debates across campus, with the foursome always maintaining a professional/friendly defense of behaviorism, but rarely changing any minds. Students witnessing or participating in these debates experienced a liberal arts and sciences education, perhaps at its best.

The 1960s foursome served CC in several other ways. Gilbert Johns was dean of the Summer Session for 15 years (1965-1980). Over the summers, he developed many musical and arts programs bringing concerts, plays, and exhibits to campus including the Colorado Opera Festival. Doug Freed helped create the current Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program now housed in CC's Education Department. Doug Freed and Gilbert Johns made special contributions to the Freedom and Authority course taught to seniors at times and to freshmen at other times. With their wide knowledge of the liberal arts and sciences and their collegial spirit, they made excellent co-teachers. Doug Freed was a daily member of the "breakfast club" in Rastall discussing the day's news with colleagues from other Departments. One British visitor in 1995 mentioned that this group reminded him of being at Cambridge University in the 1980s.

An especially notable contribution of Doug Freed and Don Shearn was their role in using evidence-based psychological principals of learning in helping establish the Block Plan. Don Shearn's statement in 1969 at Murphy's bar where he, and professors Glenn Brooks, David Finley, Doug Freed, and Tim Fuller discussed early ideas about changing CC's way of teaching has been cited as its pivotal idea: "Why don't you just give me 15 students and let me work with them."¹ Don Shearn can be seen during an interview in the 2020 video produced to commemorate the 50th year of the Block Plan, (see:

<https://www.coloradocollege.edu/basics/blockplan/2020/index.html>)

The foursomes' commitment to ensuring students continued a liberal arts and sciences education did not end when students graduated from CC. They remained valued mentors as former students started and developed their careers and families. Often the continued mentorship

¹ Robert D. Loevy, "Colorado College: A Place of Learning 1874-1999", 167.

turned into lifetime friendships. As many CC faculty have, these four psychology professors from the 1960s had a profound impact on instilling a commitment to a continuing liberal arts and sciences education for students and the Colorado College community.

About the authors of this article: Catherine Grant Weir-Parker '65, Bill Yost '66, and Lex Towns '67 were psychology students at the beginning of the term of the foursome. We greatly appreciate the education we received and our ability to participate in many of the activities the foursome created as they developed the Psychology Department. This article started as a tribute to our first academic mentors, and we quickly realized it is also an excellent case study of how Colorado College encompassed international advances in academia. We are three examples of students who were infected by these mentors and have continued to stay engaged with CC and psychology over the years. Cathey Weir-Parker is a professor emeritus of Colorado College serving as a psychology faculty member from 1989 to 2007. She published a book recently reviewing cognitive research about interpretations of visual art (2017). Bill Yost is currently working on hearing projects as a research professor in the College of Health Solutions at Arizona State University. He has been awarded several honors including a Doctor of Science, *Honoris Causa* from CC in 1997 and the Gold Medal in 2018 from the Acoustical Society of America. Lex Towns is a professor in the Department of Anatomy of the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine at A.T. Still University. His research is concerned with the comparative neuroanatomy of vertebrate visual systems, and he continues to teach part-time.