
The Mini-University: Introducing Career Options to Adolescents

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The term "summer school" brings to mind disheartened students dragging themselves to school, wishing they were instead free to enjoy a lazy summer. This impression needs to be amended when the students involved are those attending the Mini-University program at the University of Manitoba.

Conceived and designed by University of Manitoba Athletic Director Joyce Fromson, the Mini-University stresses experiential learning programs focusing on introducing children age 10 to 15 to the areas of study of the participating faculties. The courses are grouped into "modules" and the program covers four two-week sessions throughout the summer months. The 1985 modules consisted of:

MODULE A
Geography
Human Ecology
Theatre
Computer Science
Physical Education

MODULE B
Law
Architecture
Agriculture
Geological Engineering
Physical Education

MODULE C
Pharmacy
Education
Interior Design
Civil Engineering
Physical Education

MODULE D
History
Psychology
General Science
Art of T.V.
Physical Education

MODULE E
Business Administration
Computer Science
Mechanical Engineering
Physical Science
Physical Education

Instruction in each area is provided with the co-operation of the respective faculties, each of which furnishes an instructor, usually a graduate student, and the physical settings needed to implement the lesson plans. The instructors are aided in lesson preparation and delivery by a faculty advisor and an educational psychologist.

The educational psychologist fulfils a pre-commencement role in the appraisal of submitted lesson plans as to age-appropriateness and degree

of concreteness/experiential focus, hiring of staff in terms of assisting faculties in choosing the most suitable instructor and of helping choose “assistants.” Orientation and training sessions, conducted in the week before camp commencement, are other responsibilities.

As the camps progress, duties assigned to this professional include acting as a liaison between parents and the Mini-University, as a counsellor for children who are experiencing difficulty within the program, and as assessment/feedback source for the instructors and assistants. As the assistants view their positions as work practica, support and resource roles are important.

The students, who pay a fee to attend the program, come from all parts of Winnipeg and Manitoba. Due to the limited number of available spaces, registration is handled on a first-come, first-serve basis. Registration begins in mid-April and the Mini-University attracts great interest. Since the original program of the summer of 1982 enrolment has grown to almost 1,300 children for this past summer of 1985.

That growth has been spurred by the school guidance personnel who have recognized the program’s value and actively advertised it within their schools. They have contributed further by bringing interested children to campus for information/orientation sessions, by arranging transportation for their students, and by providing camp administrators with valuable feedback from participants.

More specifically, the guidance personnel of core-area schools were asked to help choose students who would benefit from inclusion in the program. Funding from a private Winnipeg source enabled the Mini-University to subsidize these students and, once again, the school counsellors, working with the teachers, designated possible participants, arranged for information/orientation sessions, did orientation tours of the campus with their students, and provided liaison and support with the program.

The students are grouped according to age in groups of fifteen. As they arrive on the first morning of each session, they are greeted by a Mini-University “assistant,” usually an undergraduate student from the faculties of Education or Physical Education. It is their duty to introduce group members and begin the process whereby new friends are made. They next tour the university facilities to help the students become more comfortable and then begin their day’s schedule, guiding their group members to, and through, the various activities planned for them within each chosen module. These “assistants” are our communication link with each student and, as they become more familiar with each student, can help to foster the individual involvement and learning that is the focus of the Mini-University philosophy.

The focus of the program is experiential career-orientated learning. Fromson (1984) described the program as “a unique opportunity to provide children... with a hands-on program of career education in

conjunction with leisure time activities” (p. 26). Its goal is to acquaint students with some of the directions of the chosen courses at a time when the pressure is building for them to make career choices which will require university education.

If experiential learning can be defined as “. . . educational programs functioning outside of conventional classrooms that place participants in responsible roles and engage them in co-operative goal-directed activities, with other youth, with adults, or both” (Hamilton, 1980, p. 180), then the philosophy and practice of the Mini-University can be so characterized. Further, the program embraces Norwood’s (1982) five major points:

- (1) emphasis on holistic education
- (2) transcends boundaries of academic discipline
- (3) rich in group interaction while simultaneously promoting autonomy and independence of individual
- (4) risk-laden
- (5) high degree of concreteness

In practice, the Mini-University adheres to the processes described by Kolb and Fry (1972) and by Coleman (1979) by incorporating in each learning experience:

- (1) concrete experimentation
- (2) reflective observation
- (3) abstract conceptualization
- (4) active experimentation

While ensuring the inclusion of these learning processes, the instructors are directed, and assisted, to recognize that each learning activity must:

- (1) be of sufficient difficulty to challenge the learner
- (2) foster student responsibility for learning
- (3) include a freedom to explore areas further than the directions (Owens, 1982)

Experiential learning being characterized by “. . . interplay between theory and experience, idea and application, reflection and encounter” (Keeton, 1983, p. 3), the following are examples of the lessons from the respective faculties.

Geography

- having used a stereoscope in class previously, construct an air-photo mosaic of downtown Winnipeg
- use of a stream table to understand the process of erosion

Human Ecology

- sensory testing of a variety of household items
- consumer testing of six products

Theatre

- introduction to, and experimentation with, mime
- use of masks and props

Law

- preparation of a will
- mock trial

Civil Engineering

- use of surveying equipment to determine land elevation
- preparation and testing of concrete

Pharmacy

- visit to U. of M. pharmacy to discover duties of a pharmacist
- preparation of mouthwash and sunscreen

Psychology

- impact of physical and mental stimuli on heart rate
- impact of non-verbal communication (smiling) in interactions with strangers

Physical Science

- examination of combustion of various objects
- use of mathematical formula to solve a Rubik's cube

Mechanical Engineering

- use of robotics
- use of design computers

Physical Education

- introduction to fencing and archery
- prevention and care of athletic injuries

These activities are planned and delivered with the admonition that "the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activities and experiences rather than knowledge to be acquired or facts to be stored" (Massey, 1981, p. 32). The Mini-University's advertised, and carefully maintained, student:teacher ratio of 8:1 facilitates individual interactions and development of personal meaning of experience.

While empirical data regarding the impact of this program is not complete, related research on similar programs (Nye, 1976; Conrad & Hedin, 1982a, b; Owens, 1982; Greenberg & Hunter, 1982; Hedin, 1983) promise positive influences already conveyed by feedback from parents and participants.

The Mini-University has shown itself to be a well-received idea and practice. While the size and form will evolve, the thrust remains constant: "It has come to be time to design learning environments, whether in school or another setting, that contain those experiences that move one along the road to self-knowledge" (Coleman, 1979, p. 9).

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