IT'S OFFICIAL:

Gallatin, a conservative approach to a radical idea, is now a school

IT WAS AN idea born during the student unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an alternative education program wherein students could take unorthodox classes and design their own courses.

In 1995, a quarter of a century after its founding, when all but a few alternative divisions have gone the way of bell-bottom trousers, the Gallatin Division, with more than 1,100 students and 11 full-time faculty supplemented with the part-time involvement of 150 other NYU faculty, has achieved full school status as the Gallatin School for Individualized Study. In the eyes of Dean Richard Koppenaal, it is the ultimate academic vindication of the whole concept of alternative education.

"Gallatin may be the only place in the country to have achieved that balance of individualized study and rigorous academic standards."

It was in 1972 that New York University launched University Without Walls with 10 students and a $25,000 budget, later renaming it the Gallatin Division after Albert Gallatin, one of the University's founding fathers and a former secretary of the treasury under Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The idea was radical, but NYU's approach to it was conservative. While students enjoyed extraordinary flexibility in designing their own educations, using courses and faculty across the entire University, in their senior year they had to pass a comprehensive oral exam on a theme developed from their study of Great Books, which are the textual basis for the division's own seminars. Students' academic choices and programs were constantly monitored through a customized advising system.

Gallatin, under the leadership of then-Dean Herbert London, later added a master's degree program. Still, the division catered to less traditional academic career paths and to less traditional students.

The school, which attracts some of the most academically qualified students who apply to and enter NYU, has also been a magnet for older students wanting to return to school to prepare for a new stage of life. For example, one woman who entered the program at age 55 went on to become a lawyer. And several Hollywood and Broadway actors and actresses have been able to continue their careers while pursuing degrees at Gallatin.

Three novelists — Ann Hood, Alix Kates Shulman, and Anna Murdoch — all launched their careers while studying writing at Gallatin. And Vanessa Thomas, while earning her living riding elephants and dangling from her neck with the Big Apple Circus, is pursuing a master's degree in arts administration.

Gallatin students have organized a variety of individualized programs of study, including fiction writing and book publishing, interpretive dance combined with business courses, pre-med studies and journalism, arts administration, ethnicity studies, conflict resolution through the performing arts, and the legal and cultural aspects of returning art treasures to the ethnic and cultural groups that produced them.

Most Gallatin students combine work in two or more of NYU's traditional schools.

The Great Books and the oral exam that students must take are special ingredients of Gallatin, says Koppenaal. Other factors, he said, include a dedicated faculty, the experience that older, non-traditional students bring to the classroom, the rich resources of the other faculties throughout the University, and the support of the University administration.

As a school, Gallatin will now be able to recruit and appoint its own tenure-track faculty. "Gallatin faculty are almost a different species of teacher," Koppenaal said. "They are committed to the idea of individualized study, but they are scholars from traditional backgrounds. They devote enormous amounts of time outside the classroom advising students not just in what courses to take but also in how to get the most out of their education.

"While it is located within a large university," said Koppenaal, "Gallatin is one of the finest small colleges in the country."

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