

State of Washington
The Evergreen State College
October 13, 1969

MEMORANDUM

To: President McCann

From: Executive Vice President Shoben

Subject: Some thoughts, mostly random, about both buildings and academic program

This memorandum is an attempt to bring a very little order into the chaos of some notes that I recorded on a Norelco at various moments as I drove across country. It is quite possible that these thoughts have no value beyond a very low provocative power and the purely abreactive function they provide for me.

First, the lecture hall that our Board recently authorized worries me just a bit. I think I understand most of its very real advantages, and I am impressed by its sculptural qualities and by the imagination and talent shown by the architects in meeting our needs as represented in spite of quite severe budgetary restrictions. Nevertheless, one of my core concerns here is that the class sizes strike me as precisely wrong. As you will recall, Beardsley Ruml persuasively pointed out in his old Memo to a College Trustee that there are two optimal class sizes--one small enough to permit maximum participation by all students enrolled, the other large enough for a good lecturer to touch the maximum number of students interested in his topic. Anything in between tends to be both uneconomic and uneducative, and construction patterns should take full account of these observations.

Obviously, put in such an unqualified fashion, these comments are much too dogmatic to go down convincingly for any of us. Nevertheless, Ruml's cost-benefit point is worth attending to: The seating capacities of classrooms ought to optimize the conditions under which different instructional techniques can be used. Groups of fifty, seventy-five, and one-hundred are sufficiently large to make full-scale discussion difficult, but they are too small to be lectured to economically. Although I realize that there are many other factors that enter into the determination of any class's size, I can't escape some worries about the steps we have taken in planning our lecture hall. They don't seem properly in phase with either our educational aspirations or our economic necessities, and I am unpersuaded that curtain walls and other similar devices would not have enlarged our flexibility.

My understandings are less admittedly than assertedly deficient here, but I have seen large high schools, Michigan State, and public buildings in which large auditoriums could be partitioned so that several groups could meet in them without an undue sense of rattling around and without being subject to too much interference by other groups meeting at the same time. Even though it is not optimal to have groups immediately adjacent to one another, space can be utilized more efficiently and more flexibly, I think, than we have managed in the present lecture hall.

Not the least of my concerns here is that we are entirely lacking in an indoor facility in which large numbers of members of the Evergreen community can get

together. If 500, 1,000, or even 1,500 of our number want to hold a major pow-wow about something--and such conclaves are clearly the order of the day--we can be quite troubled by the frustrations that are likely to result. Some movies, some speakers, and some other events can obviously draw a good deal more than 300 of our people to them, and it seems a shame to have to deal with the number of disappointments that are probably going to be occasionally on our hands. I do hope that we can look more thoroughly very soon into some of the issues I am trying to raise here.

Next, with appropriate and genuine apologies to Dave, I should like to express a little anxiety over the commitments implied by our discussions of a science building. It has been my impression that we have yet to make firm curricular decisions, and I rather thought that we had been even explicit about leaving quite open the issue of how the hard sciences might most effectively play a role in our conception of a contemporary education. I think we even talked casually about whether, given the expense of such disciplines as physics and chemistry, we ought to invest any of our resources in these fields as conventionally conceived, concentrating instead on programs of study in which we could achieve a high level of excellence and a high degree of relevance as our students are likely to define relevance.

Such far-out possibilities do not mean that science would be omitted from our curriculum. Science technologized is the Leitmotiv of our age, and the problem before us is one of how we deal with it most effectively, not one of whether we cope with it at all. Nevertheless, we have the alternatives of major areas of concentration in the history of science, the philosophy (in the broad sense) of science, the relationship of science to technology and the implications of technologized science for public policy, and the interrelationships of science and society in complex and dynamic cultures. I quite agree that students ought to have some experience in manipulation, in precise observation, in the disciplining of their thought to the rules of inference as the sciences have developed those rules, and in the planning and conduct of what can generally be called experiments, including field studies. A question is that of whether students must have that kind of experience at Evergreen or whether they can enjoy it under even better circumstances away from our shop and in connection with, say, a work-study spent in an industrial or governmental laboratory or even at a big university. If such extramural arrangements could be worked out, then we would be freer to devise a worthwhile and novel enterprise that fits a bit better both our pattern of financial constraints and, as I understand them, our educational aspirations.

I can think, for example--quite easily and not, I'm afraid, very imaginatively--of such things as a pattern of intellectual involvements in which a student, either sequentially or working back and forth among the appropriate topics, considers in some depth such matters as the rise of science in the thoughtways of modern civilization, the characteristics of science as a human endeavor (the kind of thing that Conant calls "doing science" or that Bronowski writes about) that makes it both similar to and different from such other forms of human creativity as art, philosophy, or commerce, the problems of public policy that Don Price has suggested or that Dan Greenberg has touched upon in The Politics of Pure Science, and the harrowing issues posed by the ties of science and technology to health, comfort, and opportunity on the one hand and, on the other, to war, the exploitation

of the planet, and the burdens of overpopulation. In addition to reading widely and discussing intensively their developing ideas, students could interview scientists, science administrators, and the formulators of public policy relevant to science; and to insure their knowing something about the actual work of science, they would have to spend a term or two in a laboratory or on a field station, working under conditions of responsibility but with a full opportunity to ask questions about the significance and meaning of the labors in which they were sharing. Such an enterprise ought to result in not only some fascinating projects and rather exciting papers, films, or other products, but also--and more importantly--in some changed and ripened minds. On our part, it would call for very few conventionally trained scientists and a minimum of expensive laboratory facilities; although it would permit us to send very few of our graduates on to the pursuit of doctorates in chemistry, it would allow us to take aim at an educational target that, in my judgment, very much needs frequent hitting.

The kind of faculty that such an undertaking would demand leads me to the last issue with which, for now, I want to burden you. One needn't be as wild as I have been here to agree to the general proposition that much of the criticism in which we share of contemporary undergraduate education derives from what Jencks and Riesman call "the academic revolution"--the professionalization and specialization of professors as disciplinary scholars. A major problem with an "academic community" is that it is so blastedly academic; that is, it revolves so tightly and so restrictedly around the interests of men whose professional socialization has been so specialized and whose commitments are so deeply invested in the advancement of the formal disciplines that larger, messier, more humane intellectual issues are given short shrift. One of the less fortunate ways in which departures from this pattern can be achieved is by bringing into a college or a university a critical mass of young revolutionaries or of older scholars who, having made it according to conventional criteria, have become concerned with rather different matters. Under these conditions, passion and discontent become the bases for novelty, and something less than a maximal educational opportunity is, I think, created.

Isn't there an opportunity for us to try deliberately to fashion a community of intellectuals rather than a community of scholars? The difference, very roughly, is that an intellectual attempts to bring to bear the resources of mind on issues regarded as of major human significance, whereas the scholar invests his mental capital in advancing the frontiers of a specified domain of knowledge. The intellectual struggles constantly to make the valuational base of his thought both explicit and defensible; for the scholar, the valuational base is typically implicit and occasionally opportunistic. Too much a child of my own background, I have no desire to escape entirely from formally trained scholars, PhD's, or the kinds of professors with whom I am most familiar. At the same time, I hope, even a little fiercely, that we can recruit a substantial proportion of our faculty from sources other than major graduate schools and the existing professoriate in other institutions. Writers and editors, a variety of artists, socially conscious lawyers and government officials, labor leaders and business executives, inventors, social welfare workers, and members of the mental health professions all strike me as fair game for our professorial bag. The requirement is that they all share a commitment to the utility of the intellect in the productive and constructive consideration of pressing human problems whether those problems be recurrent or distinctive to our time and culture. Unless we

add the leaven that such people are likely to define, then I have grave and unhappy fears that the educational loaf that we bake, regardless of how we wrap it, is liable to taste very much like the bread served by other institutions that we have no intention of emulating.

I'm a little concerned about having expressed these thoughts too hurriedly and with too little attention to the niceties of communication or to the full development of the values and the ideas that I have meant to convey. In sending these reflections to you, I pray that the importance of the issues appear in sufficient clarity to insure our scheduling at once some full discussions of them and that we arrive at some decisions with all deliberate speed. Otherwise, among other difficulties that delays will generate, the urgencies of our building program are likely to overwhelm the significance of our academic aspirations, and that reversal of priorities would defeat all our hopes.

Many thanks for listening, Charlie--

EJS:mw