

Rudy -
Here's what I
said.
DM

November 3, 1978

TO: Larry Stenberg and the Enrollment DTF
FROM: David Marr
SUBJECT: Straight Talk

1. Serious discussion of Evergreen's "image problem" and declining enrollment must be subsumed under the heading institutional self-definition. That is, seriously to discuss the crisis facing us requires that we examine the core of truth contained in the slogan, "We cannot be all things to all people."

I submit that in its seven years of operation Evergreen has come to define itself--tacitly if not explicitly--as a small scale super market for "educational consumers." We have inadvertently come to emulate the University of Washington. Our actual academic practice tends more and more to be a rather poor imitation of a large university. It is this seemingly inexorable tendency that will probably destroy us, for I see little evidence that we will ever be able to compete with the University (or with any other state or private institution in Washington) on its terms.

In addition to having great prestige, the University may legitimately claim a certain moral superiority in the contest for students. The University, after all, more or less fulfills its avowed mission as an educational super market and degree mill, whereas Evergreen professes to be "different" but in reality tends not to be, and prospective students are just too savvy to overlook this duplicity.

2. Interdisciplinary, collaborative learning is what makes us distinctive, or could make us distinctive were it our prevailing mode of conducting academic life. But it is precisely interdisciplinary, collaborative learning that has fallen by the way over the last seven years.

Fact: In 1971 Evergreen's curriculum consisted entirely of some ten or eleven year long, full time, interdisciplinary, collaborative programs of study, in which all but a handful of the College's approximately 1000 students were enrolled. There was a waiting list that year of several hundred students desiring admission. In 1978 our curriculum is a congeries of a few small good interdisciplinary, collaborative programs of study, modules, numerous group contracts, and hundreds of individual contracts. We have no problem this year of a long waiting list.

To try to account for this set of facts mainly through citing demographic trends or by invoking the spectre of The New Vocationalism is to overlook the tremendous fragmentation which we ourselves have engineered and which now threatens to ruin us. Like it or not,

Good

we have, ironically, created exactly the kind of educational institution to which we once proudly declared Evergreen to be a worthy "alternative." How has this come about?

In the last seven years we have "developed" an academic context in which it is all but impossible for interdisciplinary, collaborative learning to thrive; currently, it is barely surviving. Students have fled from coordinated studies in large part because we have provided them with an endless variety of havens: sanctuaries in which they do not have to face the rigors and problems of interdisciplinary, collaborative learning: sanctuaries in which faculty members do not have to face them either. We have always rationalized this flight, of course, in noble liberal rhetoric, only of late disingenuously wonder why it is that our image is, among other things, one of curricular anarchy, why it is that students prefer to go to college somewhere else, why it is that they evidently are not attracted by the "alternative" that we still have the temerity to say we offer. But I ask, On what grounds may we reasonably expect prospective students to be attracted to a brand of education that we ourselves don't believe in enough to support with the bulk of our money, our talent, and faculty and administrative decisiveness?

Community? Even the recent faculty discussion of a college-wide coordinated studies requirement, to say nothing of the CPE's expected recommendation that such a requirement be adopted, misses this crucial point. Interdisciplinary, collaborative learning cannot survive in a context in which it enjoys the status of just another "option" among an increasing number of options. Such curricular options themselves, become, by a vexing irony, the alternative--that is, the alternative to coordinated studies itself: the alternative to the alternative, if you will. Pernicious individualism becomes the ruling principle of academic life.

The reason that interdisciplinary, collaborative learning perishes in such a climate is simple: interdisciplinary, collaborative learning is just too hard, too demanding, too rigorous, too exhausting, for all who are involved in it. There are just too many pretexts for fleeing from it. You have a "bad" seminar, and the students go away disgruntled and the teacher gets depressed. Maybe I should do a contract, the student muses. Maybe I should do a group contract, the teacher says, brooding. The dean says, Find twenty students, and you can; find less than twenty and you'll have to make up the rest in contracts.

And so, says Vonnegut, it goes. And so, I believe, it has gone at Evergreen since about our third year of operation.

Interdisciplinary, collaborative learning is very hard indeed. Only the most talented faculty can do it. As for students, if (a) they are reasonably patient and (b) they can be shielded from the destructive temptations arising from curricular fragmentation, they will learn by this method. The evidence--as contained in my and my colleagues' evaluations, letters of recommendation, and the like--demonstrates to my satisfaction that the quality of students' learning is superior to that which is characteristic of academic

life in conventional institutions.

Were interdisciplinary, collaborative learning the norm at Evergreen, and not the exception, it would carry a legitimacy that no mere distribution requirement, such as has lately been proposed, will ever have. There is a sense in which the student protest against the proposed coordinated studies requirement may be a covert plea for the degree of authenticity and legitimacy in our curriculum which had only just begun to characterize an Evergreen education in the first year or two and which, since then, has steadily disappeared, leaving in its wake the seemingly insuperable problems with our image and our enrollment that we face today.

3. In the name of meeting student "needs" and faculty "needs" we have since the first year or two carried out a silent coup d'état--against ourselves. We are now, I fear, in this committee on the verge of consolidating that coup. Once it is consolidated, there will be no justification--none even based on sheer lying--capable of sustaining us. Unless interdisciplinary, collaborative learning is reinstated as the true hallmark of our self-definition, we will go down together--faculty, administrators, staff, and students alike.

The tenor of our committee work thus far, however, suggests a widespread blindness to the very nature of the problem and, concomitantly, a rather breezy faith that somehow tinkering with our image, apart from close scrutiny of what it is an image of, and should be an image of, is the best course. Such piecemeal approaches created our current dilemma, and they will doubtless finish us off if we yield to the easy temptation to devise and implement more of them, as though what is called for is a massive dose of homeopathic medicine.

4. Evergreen's in-state reputation stinks. Is the odor a mere phantasm in the minds of our several audiences? Or does it actually issue from what we do and have been doing? It is too easy to say yes to the first question and too embarrassing and painful to say yes to the second. But just as I am certain we will not solve our problems by embracing the easy answer, so too can I only wonder if there is any reason, based on our institutional history, to expect that we will summon the moral courage seriously to entertain the other answer, or if we do whether enough time remains to us to act on our deliberations.

5. Our out-of-state reputation smells pretty good, by all accounts of which I have become aware since coming here in June of 1971. Whereas Evergreen has little or no reputation in-state for excellence, but only a paradoxical reputation for being in the news, out of state Evergreen is still seen by prospective students and by educational professionals as, if not an excellent college, then as an interesting, worthy alternative. My experience tells me that our out-of-state reputation is well worth exploiting: I think we should go after out-of-state students.

There are several reasons for this proposal. First, I have no evidence that there is a sufficiently large applicant pool in-state.

Yes, but
no

Yes!

You can't get blood out of a turnip, and in many ways this state, especially the southwestern part of it, resembles a turnip. Second, our goal should be not just survival but significant growth: not just 2500 FTE but 4000 FTE, perhaps more. I see no way of either merely surviving or growing if we fix our sights mainly on the state of Washington, much less on southwest Washington--no way, that is, short of continuing our present disastrous course toward ever increasing fragmentation, producing modules in this and courses in that. Third and most important, by getting a significantly larger proportion of good out-of-state students--and by "good" I emphatically do not mean only those with high SAT's from the wealthy white suburbs but a broad range of students of variegated academic, social and racial backgrounds--we will raise the level of mediocrity at the college generally. For in truth serious students will not support a weak faculty or endorse curricular chaos. There is, then, a subterranean connection between, on the one hand, the sheer existence of sufficient numbers of serious students (a kind of critical mass) and, on the other, the success of faculty evaluation, which all but the most benighted among us acknowledge to be mainly a failure.

Objections to this proposal are all too predictable. To begin with, it will be said that our hands are tied by the Legislature: we dare not show too high an out-of-state enrollment, much less recruit out of state (which may be prohibited by law, for all I know). I say: break those ties. That is, let us wage the tough political fight in the Legislature and in the CPE that is called for here. And let our avowed purpose be the creation in Washington of the best state-supported undergraduate college in the nation, a college that the citizens of Washington can be proud of, one that at long last they will have good, compelling reasons for sending their sons and daughters to.

Extremes meet.

Who among us would not gladly devote their talent and energy to this end? Or do we simply accept the given condition as inevitable and gloomily trudge off on the next all but futile recruiting trip to Sequim, or Federal Way, or Aberdeen, or Capitol High School?

If we say yes to the second question, as I suspect most will do, then we simply cannot dodge the following question: how can we expect to compete with the University of Washington (and with other conventional institutions)? The University's self-definition is intact, and the University has little trouble meeting its contract with the state. Ours is in disarray--so much so that we now find ourselves eagerly awaiting the CPE report to find out who we are.

6. My final remarks concern the place and fate of the humanities at Evergreen.

I contend that the humanities are the soul of any education rightly considered. They are what make up the "liberal arts" in a liberal arts and sciences college. Of all the conventional

Here's the key!

departments of knowledge, only the humanities are capable of teaching the ends of life. Thus to study the humanities is to become involved in the critical and self-critical inquiry into the meaning of existence. The sciences do not tell us where we came from, or inform us of our ancestors' dreams and crimes. Training in chemistry cannot overcome one's idiocy in the face of The Tempest, any more than a degree in journalism signifies an ability to write. Nor can the so-called social sciences account for moral complexity--or, some would say, for complexity of any kind. The central problem of philosophy, said Albert Camus, is embedded in the act of suicide: for this act, more compellingly than any other, raises the question whether life is worth living. And though all men experience this dilemma in some way, it is only through the discipline of humanistic study that one learns to articulate it clearly and explore it fully.

Critical and self-critical inquiry in the humanities teaches intellectual self-discipline, personal development, and the uses of the imagination, both one's own imagination and that of the great writer, thinker, or artist. To study the humanities aright is to learn to see the world not just as a natural phenomenon (after the manner of the sciences and the more purblind social sciences) but as a distinctively human phenomenon. Whether such study makes one a better person is an empty question. That it can be dispensed with, or played down, in undergraduate education is perhaps the most striking stupidity we shall have the occasion to entertain.

It matters not a whit to me that certain data can be cited indicating a lack of interest on the part of new Evergreen students in the humanities (or on the part of students across the nation, for that matter). A good part of what the term "beginning student" means is not knowing that you have to study the humanities in order to stand a chance of becoming educated. It is an inescapable truth: you cannot have education without the humanities. Education by definition includes humanistic study; else, you have training, and no matter how training is packaged, it is quickly exposed in the outside world for what it is. One can learn accounting and business management, physics and neurophysiology, or simply weave baskets and call them art, and still remain an illiterate, if not a knave, to the degree that one's specialized knowledge is not informed or subverted by the critical and self-critical spirit peculiar to humanistic study. Nor will a conventional "smattering" of humanities do. There is no way out of just submitting to the requirements of humanistic study and absorbing and mastering its unique view of the world. Moreover, thanks to the inherent conservatism of accrediting associations, no liberal arts and sciences college can long retain its accreditation if it should be demonstrated that it does not provide significant humanistic study. Nor should it.

But how to sell the humanities in this day and age? There's the puling, ritualistic complaint. Sell the humanities? Indeed. Why, the very idea is absurd. Sell the humanities? Would you sell Hard Times? Would you sell Descartes' Meditations? Perhaps Stevens' Sunday Morning? Maybe sell a little U.S. slavery too? Is Madame Bovary only a whore? If so, what are you, dear reader?

Now, if the humanities had had to rely on salesmen for their

protection, cultivation, dissemination, and influence over the centuries, we would still be in the Dark Ages, howling at the full moon in our primeval forest. Brooks Adams was surely right: there is only one reason capitalists, or salesmen, are not fit to rule society: they only know about money and are as ignorant as babes of everything else in life.

It is not that the humanities are too precious to be sold: this is only a red herring tossed up in desperation by those who dogmatically believe that literally everything has its price if only, with the aid of the appropriate technique, it can be ascertained. The point is that the humanities are not commodities; they are not wares to be hawked. American society does not supply-- nor has it ever supplied--a reason for studying the humanities. By contrast, pragmatic America historically has supplied abundant reasons for studying science, social science, and business. These latter fields sell well because they are in tune with the instrumental character of modern society. But no adventitious reason for humanistic study makes sense, and none will ever be made to "pay off." The only compelling reason for studying the humanities resides in that study itself; it supplies its own reason.

At Evergreen the humanities have been the seedbed of our most authentic interdisciplinary learning ventures. The reason is not far to seek: the humanistic tradition is the only source of general ideas. All else is bits and pieces. It is not the physicist qua physicist but the physicist qua philosopher of science, that is, the physicist insofar as he is also a humanist, who conceives an interdisciplinary line of inquiry involving, say, concepts of motion in various media (e.g., in modern art, literature, social life, and physical space). And when the physicist qua philosopher of science does devise such a line of inquiry, he immediately recognizes that to pursue it calls for many minds in addition to, and different from, his own.

Herein lies the connection between interdisciplinary study and collaborative learning. To forge that link has been the perennial task of curricular design, as we have defined it, a task that is simply unthinkable apart from humanistic study or in a climate in which the humanities do not enjoy great prestige.

In short, as the humanities at Evergreen go, so goes Evergreen. The worst mistake we could make in our consideration of Evergreen's image and enrollment problems would be to suppose that the perceived lack of student interest in the humanities is in fact real. At most, all the data mean is that students are just that: students, that is, those who have a lot to learn. The real question is not whether beginning students understand the meaning of education but whether we do. For only on the basis of such an understanding can we hope to formulate our self-definition, which in turn, as I have argued, is the only true practical solution to the problem of declining enrollment.

Dwight