ABSTRACT OF PAPER FOR CONFERENCE ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN AMERICAN COLLEGES

HIPPIE-HAVEN, ECOTOPIA OR ACADEMICS:

Evergreen's Farm Program as a case study of the Role of Agriculture in Alternative Education

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the past, present and possible future role of agriculture as part of a liberal arts curriculum. It focuses on the problems of teaching agriculture at Evergreen, particularly in relation to teaching modes, curriculum, faculty participation and student expectations. Creative approaches to resolving these problems are presented, and the future potential of agriculture as part of an alternative liberal arts program is explored.

Specific themes covered are:

I. Why teach agriculture in a liberal arts college? The historical and philosophical basis for the existence of agricultural studies as part of the general movement in the 1960's toward environmental programs and the desire of urban-based students to regain control of their survival. Agricultural education in the U.S. developed largely in the land grant universities as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862. Concern about food production and supply has been considered historically as a technological problem outside of the realm of a liberal arts education. However, mis-use of agricultural chemicals and economic and ecological instabilities in modern agriculture, along with global food shortages, made it clear that agriculture is an integral part of everyone's life. Realization of the role of agriculture in environmental studies programs coincided with a demand for agriculture courses by liberal arts students, resulting in "farm programs" in many colleges which, in the past, had never considered such studies.

II. What has been Evergreen's experience with alternative modes of teaching agriculture? The farm program has had a stormy history at Evergreen, being the conjunction of a controversial subject, innovative teaching methods, and a propensity to attract students interested in alternative life styles. Conflicts have arisen over how much emphasis to place on applied versus academic studies, over 'science' versus 'liberal arts' orientation of the students and subject matter, over the degree of structured versus spontaneous learning, and over the emphasis on traditional science approaches versus more popular movements (organic farming, biodynamic, spiritual). Faculty and student expectations over program content and requirements have often conflicted, resulting in a high turnover of faculty and problems with continuity in the program.

III. Where are we going from here? The resolution of the above conflicts at Evergreen and the evolution of the present program with a strong ecological and land-use planning orientation within the environmental studies area. Specific teaching modes that have been successful include combining science courses, seminars on broader social issues, student originated research projects, journal writing and research papers, farm work day and student planning and maintenance of the organic farm and garden, student involvement in community outreach programs, program involvement with community networking and cooperative extension programs with W.S.U., and possibilities for a wide range of internships—from work on farms to work with research institutes. A blend of rigorous academic work and applied farm skills (at about a 3:1 ratio) seems to offer the best solution of the above conflicts. Future possibilities for agricultural studies at Evergreen are examined with the light of new ...