

The Evergreen State College

April 12, 1985

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Faculty
FROM: Patrick Hill
RE: Exxon/FLC

As most of you have already learned we have received a planning grant from the Exxon Educational Foundation, expandable and renewable if we attract more money. Prospects for doing that are quite good. The purpose of this memo is a) to acquaint you with the grant and its proposed activities, b) explain the potential benefits to TESC, and c) encourage you to join a discussion at the Retreat currently scheduled for late Thursday afternoon.

The Exxon Grant

The grant is seed money for the creation of a Washington State Center for the Improvement of the Quality of Undergraduate Education. The Center, to be located on our campus, expects (if full funding is acquired) to work with a dozen or so campuses in the state. Centrally involved at the outset will be Western Washington University, Seattle Central Community College and the two other community colleges in Seattle's District Six, Tacoma Community College, Seattle University and TESC. Within two years, we expect participation from many of the colleges and universities in the Puget Sound area and from Central Washington University. The Center would lead the development of Federated Learning Communities and Evergreen coordinated studies programs at participating campuses. Barbara Smith, co-author of the grant, will direct the activities of the Center.

The "export" of Evergreen coordinated studies programs and the initiation of Federated Learning Communities, it must be stressed, while highly valuable and effective, are not ends in themselves. In the grant, they are spoken of as vehicles to a larger reform effort, the goals of which include: a) improving teaching and learning effectiveness through the unique feedback mechanisms of the communities; b) developing model curricula which address the incoherence of the curriculum and the isolation of the Humanities and the Social Sciences from significant dialogue with (among other things) scientific and technological developments; c) facilitating the transfer of knowledge and scarce resources among institutions in the interests of both faculty and curricular development; and d) increasing the retention and graduation rates

among minority students through specially created learning communities which will begin at two-year institutions and continue on with cooperating four-year institutions.

A genealogy of the Center would focus on the following developments:

1. Coordinated Studies at TESC and all its predecessors.
2. The Federated Learning Communities (FLC) at Stony Brook, which set out to capture the impact of coordinated studies in situations wherein one could not expect to find the generalized commitment to teaching and interdisciplinary education as is found at TESC.
3. The spread of the FLC model to a dozen colleges (including large universities, small liberal arts colleges, ethnically diverse community colleges and adult learning programs.
4. The TESC-Seattle Central exchange which demonstrated a) the enormous attractiveness and institutional impact of team-based exchanges, and b) the underdeveloped opportunity for TESC to assume leadership in the State in developing more effective undergraduate education.
5. The recent report of the National Institute of Education which called for the creation of learning communities on every campus in the country (excerpt attached).
6. The interest of the Exxon Educational Foundation in disseminating the learning communities approach to undergraduate education. In the grant, FLC is spoken of as "the exportable version of coordinated studies."

Copies of the grant application have been sent to all convenors and directors. If you wish more information, please acquire one of those copies and/or speak with Barbara Smith.

Benefits to TESC

My major motivations in pursuing this grant were only indirectly related to the desire to improve the quality of undergraduate education in the State of Washington. Underlying my decision was my judgment that, like any institution, TESC would benefit greatly from an infusion of new faculty with new ideas; that we need new development opportunities for our own faculty; and that the state is not likely to provide us the funds to address those problems. If fully funded, the grant would bring dozens of faculty from around the state to work with us in coordinated studies or FLC-like programs. Dozens of opportunities would be created for TESC faculty to work in leadership roles with other faculty on other campuses.

A second major motivation, announced at my Convocation address in September, concerned the internal developmental opportunities which FLC might represent to the campus. Our professional leaves and development funds are ludicrously

inadequate. Almost independent of the grant, I am proposing to you the creation of a very small number of FLC-like programs on this campus as a means of developing internal sabbaticals for our faculty, opportunities to immerse oneself for a short period in (primarily) discipline-based teaching in a situation (which the FLC structure makes possible) of a significantly reduced workload. While I can't say that the experience for the students will be the same or as good as a good coordinated studies program, I can guarantee you that it will be a similar experience of high quality. What difference there might be is justified in my judgment by the opportunities it creates for the faculty, necessary for the continued intellectual vitality of the institution.

You will have to read or re-read the FLC material previously provided you to assure yourselves that the student experience in FLC is one you could feel good about. For the present, I want to concentrate on 1) why the workload would be so much less, and 2) on the similarities and differences between FLC and coordinated studies.

1. There are two major reasons why the workload would be so much less:
 - a. Many responsibilities currently shared in a coordinated studies programs (e.g., for learning all or most of the material contributed to a program by one's teaching colleagues) are localized in one person in the FLC model--Master Learner. When I sat in a coordinated studies program in my 1976 visit to TESC, I said to myself: "I'll never get the Stony Brook faculty in general to make such commitments, but I know I could get ten or fifteen who would. Is there any way I could work with the commitments of those persons and bend the contributions of the less committed to an outcome like that of coordinated studies?"
 - b. FLC was designed to be a developmental unit and to provide an opportunity for faculty to acquire new knowledge or skills. Released time and/or reduced loads were built into the conception in the recognition that the daily life and reward system of the institution would forever impede the needed developments. While guaranteeing a high quality student experience and requiring that the team of participants as a whole still carries a comparable number of students, the TESC version of FLC would dramatically reduce contact hours, preparation time, and evaluation responsibilities. Barbara and I will explain how that might work at Thursday afternoon's meeting.
2. These are some of the important similarities and differences between coordinated studies and FLC, or rather between some conceptions of coordinated studies and FLC:
 - a. Both are interdisciplinary and team-taught. Both regard an integrated quarter or semester, rather than individual courses, as the basic unit of instruction. Compared to many versions of coordinated studies, the FLC model is far less interpersonally intensive for the faculty (and slightly less so for the students). While the teachers do not operate in isolation from each other,

they have, comparatively speaking, far more autonomy and control over what they do. Despite the autonomy, the quality of intellectual feedback of a disciplinary and interdisciplinary sort, assuming a wise choice of Master Learner, can be as great or greater than that which is gained in a more distributively collegial model.

- b. Because of the lessened interpersonal intensity and the comparatively greater autonomy, it is possible to allow the subject matter of a program to dictate selection of personnel. Bridging the traditional intellectual divisions, for example, between the Humanities and the Natural Sciences, becomes easier, because there is less need for all the participants themselves to spend time with and be personally committed to learning all the material central to their colleagues' teaching. Interpersonal compatibility also becomes less necessary, because the component parts are less thoroughly interdependent.
- c. The Master Learner, on the basis of monitoring and assessing the reactions of a significant group of students, can provide more detailed and differentiated feedback on one's teaching than is obtainable by any method that I know of. This is particularly valuable at this juncture of TESC's history as we try to attract a more and more traditionally aged college population. Several of you have expressed to me a concern that we are not in touch with the needs and rhythms of our younger students.
- d. The "Program Seminar" differs from the "Book Seminar" in that the former normally has no reading material additional to the reading material of the federated courses. The Program Seminar is an "open space" where the students, with the assistance of the Master Learner, attempt to integrate the material of the federated courses. It is not a drawback--indeed it is useful in making the students more active--if the material of the federated courses has not been fully integrated by the faculty team. Sometimes a well-chosen book could be helpful in this task, but for the most part, it was judged counterproductive.
- e. FLC is interdisciplinary to its core, but the individual components are disciplinary in character. Of those on the TESC faculty who feel that they have lost touch with their disciplines, the FLC model offers an opportunity for intensive re-immersion in one's discipline while still guaranteeing to the students a comparable interdisciplinary experience, as does coordinated studies. While doing so, the curriculum could address more directly than it does now the problem of the skill-acquisition pre-requisite for doing genuinely advanced-level work.

Yes, you will need more information to think about the potential of FLC. In November, I sent every faculty member a copy of my article, "Communities of Learners." (About 25 of you then participated in a discussion of the article with David Marr and me.) That article might still be in your possession. In

the event that you have misplaced it, you might call Karen Gose for one of the few that are left. A reading or re-reading of that article is important for understanding the theoretical foundations of FLC. The attached three-page summary, extracted from the Exxon grant, is focused on the operational structure of FLC and may suffice to answer some of your questions.

What are we hoping to get from the faculty? For the most part, just expressions of interest or disinterest in working with the new Center either here or at one of the other campuses in the State. More particularly, we need to know if some people are interested enough to study all the FLC material and volunteer to participate in a central way. More particularly still, we need to find a program or two willing to work with us in 1985-86, accepting a Master Learner into a faculty-enriched program and converting to the FLC model.

During Thursday evening's soiree, in a room set aside for this purpose, Barbara and I will be explaining in more detail the Exxon grant, the FLC concept, and the opportunities for the TESC faculty. Please make an effort to be there.

One last note: since money is so scarce these days, you may appreciate knowing that the duplication and travel expenses associated with obtaining this grant and informing you about it have themselves come from a grant.

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Attachments

The Federated Learning Communities Model

Content-wise, FLC has a familiar enough air: a series of interdisciplinary programs addressing complex, large-scale issues of our time. The first such program at Stony Brook was on "World Hunger" and drew upon the disciplines of ecology, economics, philosophy, demography, literature and political science. The second program was on "Cities, Utopias and Environments: Designs for Living," and drew upon the disciplines of ecology, comparative literature, theatre, psychology, history and art. The third program, "Technology, Values and Society," drew from engineering, chemistry, philosophy, sociology, history and literature. The fourth program, "Social and Ethical Issues in the Life Sciences," drew on biology, community medicine, philosophy, literature, psychology and sociology. It is not in terms of content, however, that FLC transforms the teaching and learning environments. Rather, the transformation takes place in terms of four structural changes:

1. The federation of three, six or nine courses into one, two or three continuous thematically coherent quarters. The courses come from many different disciplines and span the traditional three divisions of the university, and attempt to be a microcosm of the institution's resources. Not an alternative nor a refuge, but a microcosm of the institution's potential. The federated courses are already existing, sometimes huge courses in the college curriculum. The federated courses become the academic base for cohorts or communities of students grouped in multiples of 35 or 40, who travel as a subset through all six courses. Without going into great detail, several aspects of federation should be mentioned lest they escape notice:
 - a. A three-course quarter rather than individually taught, non-interacting courses becomes the unit of education.
 - b. The federation makes the meaning of intellectual inquiry much more visible or accessible. Affairs of the intellect are no longer experienced as arbitrary or as mere matters of taste. The courses support each other with a common focus, shared language, somewhat overlapping reading material and common reference points, e.g. to Heidegger or to the problems of genetic engineering.
 - c. Infrequently, but significantly, the multiple authority figures come into conflict and force students to go beyond their often unquestioning attitude toward expertise.
 - d. The federation of widely diverse disciplines attracts a rich student community which is looked upon as rivaling the resources of the classroom itself. Majors from all over the college/university force an engagement with diverse perspectives.
 - e. All of the FLC programs include the natural sciences. The nature of the urgent problems of our times forces this departure from usual liberal education programs.

2. A Program Seminar is built atop the three federated courses of each of the two federated semesters. The Seminar has no new or additional material to that of the federated courses. The Seminar is like a discussion session but with three rather than one course at its base. Students in the Seminar learn integrating skills and are assisted in developing their own unique perspective on the theme of the program. Only those students in all three federated courses of a quarter may register for the Seminar.

The Program Seminar is an open or a reflective space in the curriculum in which time is allotted and assistance provided to think about the relationships among the parts that constitute the rest of one's education and to define one's own perspective relative to those parts. An example may illustrate the nature and the academic point of the Seminar. In the program on World Hunger, the federated courses in economics and ethics and ecology at different times during the semester utilized the concept of exploitation. The contrasting accounts, inspired by different disciplinary and ideological perspectives, were brought up for discussion in the Program Seminar. And the philosophy course with its Kantian perspective was used to explore the differences between the economic and ecological concept. The discussion was brought back to the professors, resulting in a modification of a final exam to allow students to draw upon multiple perspectives.

The Seminar, because of its comparative smallness and its rigid co-requisite structure, becomes an academic center wherein people who share academic experience become known to each other and communication among them is facilitated. In the ordinary course of registration patterns, there might be a dozen students registered for two or three of the federated courses. But without the Program Seminar as an academic center, without the open space and time in the curriculum, those students would not know that they were in the same courses nor would they have the opportunity or the assistance to begin to tap the educational resources of intelligent dialogue.

In terms of curricular organization, the Seminar functions mainly to provide the opportunity for public reflection on the shared academic experience of the federated courses. In pedagogical terms, the Seminar has two additional functions. First, the Seminar is the place where students are encouraged to utilize the disciplinary resources of their courses and the interdisciplinary resources of community to develop their own ideas and perspectives on the subject matter. They are so encouraged both structurally and pedagogically; for the Seminar is conceived (as will be more obvious shortly) to make nearly impossible the regurgitation of the lectures; and the assignments always demand an active attempt on the part of the student to do something which their teachers have not done, viz., to bring the resources of the federated disciplinary courses into interdisciplinary relation around a sub-theme of the student's choosing.

Secondly, the Seminar functions as a reliable cybernetic mechanism. Far too much of our teaching proceeds without any feedback at all and far too much proceeds on the basis of highly selective feedback (e.g., exams constructed by us or comments of a handful of interested students). In the Seminar, one can monitor from week to week and over long-term periods the impact of lectures and assignments through the responses of a large subset of students with differing interests and abilities. How this happens will be apparent in the description of the third of FLC's structural innovations.

3. The Seminar is taught by a new kind of teaching professional, a Master Learner. A member of the faculty and a distinguished teacher, the Master Learner returns to class as an undergraduate student in an area where he/she possesses no prior expertise. The Master Learner attends class every day, takes all the exams, writes term papers and is graded. In the Program Seminar, the only teaching duty during this period, he/she uses acquired learning skills to assist students in putting together the material for the three federated courses. As importantly, extensive feedback is provided to assist each student in defining subject matter and focus of individual interest. On the basis of intimate knowledge of the classes and of the students in those classes, the Master Learner provides each of the participating faculty with extensive feedback regarding teaching effectiveness. That feedback creates the opportunity for continuing renewal of the institution.

The combination of the feedback mechanism of the Program Seminar and the mediation of the Master Learner enable the students to become co-determiners of their education. Students know that they have real input and that they are listened to (even when no drastic change follows). Because the Seminar is "taught" by one who is learning just as the students are, because it contains no new material and its subject matter is always one wherein there exist no unquestioned experts, the student is forced into a more active role.

4. Fourthly, a Core Course is team-taught by all the federated faculty. In this course, the most explicit attention is given to the theme of the program and to the nature and interrelationship of disciplines. The course meets once a month for three quarters; over the course of that period, the students in time, in view of their greater exposure to the course material, assume responsibility for the teaching of the course. Not quite literally, the faculty become the students and the students become the faculty. At the least, they exchange places in the classroom.

5.

Every institution of higher education should strive to create learning communities, organized around specific intellectual themes or tasks.

This is the first of two recommendations we make concerning the creation and strengthening of communities *within* colleges. Effective learning communities such as those built around common themes (for example, ethics in science) can strengthen opportunities for intellectual dialogue and other forms of active learning. The larger the institution, the more critical these niches are in providing a meaningful academic identification for students.

Effective learning communities have a number of distinctive features:

- They are usually smaller than most other units on campus.
- They have a sense of purpose.
- They help overcome the isolation of faculty members from one another and from their students.
- They encourage faculty members to relate to one another both as specialists and as educators. (In effect this encourages the development of new faculty roles.)
- They encourage continuity and integration in the curriculum.
- They help build a sense of group identity, cohesion, and "specialness."

The academic activities of learning communities should be credit bearing for both faculty and students. They can involve groups of courses from different departments, seminars based on the special theme or task the group is pursuing, or research (basic and applied) in cooperation with external agencies, business firms, or community organizations.

Dormitories can be organized to offer their own academic programs and are thus one working model of what we have in mind. But for the commuter, adult, and part-time students in our institutions, other approaches—such as weekend colleges and short-term but intense periods of residence on campus—are necessary. Honors programs organized around a specific theme (as opposed to "general honors") can also become learning communities.

In addition, the loose association of students majoring in a given subject can be transformed into a more tightly knit community, but frequently the number of students majoring in a field may be too large to form an effective community. Many students develop a consuming focus on their majors in order to establish academic identity. But we hold that academic identity should not be limited to the major. Precisely because of the need we see for breadth of study, integration of knowledge, and the application of what is studied to life, it is critical to establish intellectual communities beyond the major.

These communities are particularly important for first- and second-year college students, who can thus be allowed to experience the joy of group learning and peer support. Group learning, we should point out, is far more characteristic of the workplace than it is of the university. Employers frequently cite the ability to learn and work in groups as a key predictor of success on the job.

excerpted from Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education. Final report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. Sponsored by the National Institute of Education. October 1984.