21 February 1994

TO: Jeanne Hahn, for the Academic Program Subcommittee,
Long-Range Planning DTF

FROM: Burt Guttman

SUBJECT: A vision for the Evergreen curriculum

In November, 1993, Pris Bowerman called for visions for the Evergreen curriculum. Members of the faculty who read the packet of materials for the recent retreat have seen my conception; the following is a slightly revised version addressed to this DTF. There was no real opportunity to discuss these matters at the retreat, but I believe the deliberations of this DTF are a more appropriate forum anyway. I therefore implore you to recognize that I am talking about the most serious issue facing the world today and about a truly significant role that Evergreen could play in addressing that issue.

Evergreen, like many other colleges, says that we are trying to prepare students to live in the 21st century. It is time for us to realize what that really implies for the orientation of much of the curriculum.

It should be clear that if there are going to be any people at all living by the end of the 21st century, in anything resembling civilized and humane conditions, there is one enormous problem that must be solved: averting the ultimate ecological disaster. The forces of overpopulation, pollution, and ecosystem destruction are so great, so pervasive, so apparently unstoppable, that they constitute a threat to the continuing existence of life on Earth. Viewed realistically, the future for our students and their immediate descendants looks bleak indeed.

This is the problem that humanity--and, by extension, educational institutions--must address. At first glance, it would seem to imply that Evergreen should simply develop our environmental studies program and hire more environmental scientists. I believe this is partially true, and was remiss, in earlier versions of this paper, in underemphasizing the importance of having more scientists of all kinds in the faculty. (Let me call your attention to Michael Beug's memo of 15 December 1993, attached.) However, the solution to our ecological problems is not primarily scientific. It is, rather, economic and social. This, in fact, is one of the major reasons that the problem should be of interest to a major part of the Evergreen faculty. I put it to you that the changes humanity must make to avert the ecological disaster are identical with those changes that must be made to solve our pervasive economic, social, and health problems. Lester R. Brown, of the Worldwatch Institute, has said that a real environmentalist these days must be considered someone who is working for fundamental changes in our economic system, and I think this observation goes to the heart of the problem(s). The dominant world economic system encourages population growth, to create more workers and consumers; it is this system that demands that everyone in this overcrowded world must have a job to survive, no matter how unnecessary or destructive that job might be; and it is the insane drive for profit that underlies pollution and the devastation of ecosystems. Furthermore, it is easy to see how closely these factors are tied to other world and national problems: among others, depletion of energy

resources, deteriorating health, the widening gap between rich and poor, increasing poverty and social deterioration, wars arising from competition for diminishing resources, increasing violence, crime, and interclass and interethnic strife, and the need for land reform and empowerment of native peoples. Faculty members with different expertise could undoubtedly list other related issues and problems; and there is probably something in this list to interest everyone in our current faculty and everyone we would want to hire.

Many Evergreen students, like others of their generation, are aware of these matters, but most are not. In any case, the issues are so serious, so complex, so intimately tied together, and of such concern to a large share of the Evergreen faculty that they constitute a proper orientation for the bulk of our curriculum. It is appropriate for Evergreen, which has been a leading innovator in education, to now lead in directing education to the solution of these universal problems. Someone must do it. Somehow, the problems must be solved, or humanity (and the bulk of the living things we share this planet with) simply winds up in the cosmic trash bin.

You may think that I'm calling for "Environment Across the Curriculum," as another little burden (writing, math, multiculturalism, you name it) to be imposed on every program. I'm not. It would be ridiculous to try to somehow orient every program a little toward this problem; most programs would wind up resentfully paying lip-service to the issue. Rather, I'm suggesting that we encourage people to devise programs that address whatever aspects of these complex problems they may be interested it, and I'm suggesting, particularly, that we factor this orientation into future faculty hiring. I think there's a broad perception that we are trying to have a little bit of everything in the curriculum--in spite of our continually resolving that we won't do so. It is clear from student interest that we need a lot more faculty members with expertise in environmental matters, and the broad view of these issues that I'm proposing would require improving faculty numbers in quite a broad range of disciplines.

Parenthetically, I should note that Jane Jervis has some related concerns about the Evergreen environment; she foresees pressures from the outside to take over and use our land in some way, or pressure to justify our own use of it. The emphasis on environmental matters that I propose would contribute enormously to preservation of our local environment.

All kinds of other proposals for the curriculum will undoubtedly emerge. I am afraid, however, that our curriculum and hiring policies are likely to be driven primarily by default by a directionless organic growth in which people develop trendy, fashionable programs and propose to hire new faculty members with little plan, except that "it would be nice to have a . . . ." The result will be that Evergreen will continue to do what we keep telling ourselves we cannot do: "Be all things to all people." We will continue to give in to vocal student groups and to short-term faculty interests without much broader perspective. At the same time, we will be ignoring the large number of prospective students who are concerned about the problems I've outlined here and are looking for places to study them. Evergreen ought to be such a place.

The Evergreen faculty currently shows strong interests in a great variety of cultural issues, and especially with multiculturalism. I ask you to realize that if we do not solve the problems of population growth and ecological disaster, there simply isn't going to be anything resembling civilization, with all its varied cultures. Humanity will be plunged into a dark hell so terrible that

our descendants will look upon our current problems with envy. I have also alluded to the all-pervasive nature of the population-ecological problem; it should be obvious, I think, that solutions to this problem underlie solutions to the problems of different peoples living together in harmony and mutual understanding. Studying the one set of issues contributes to solutions for the other set of issues.

No one should have any illusions about the seriousness of the problems and the ability of a small college to have much impact on them. But we do have an enormous opportunity to show the way, to show how seriously we take these problems, and what higher education can contribute to their solution. Even if our students stand witness to the cutting of the last fir and the death of the last sparrow, they will be able to say that we did our best.