Burt Guttman, 10 February 1994

STUDENT-DESIGNED ENTRY TO EVERGREEN
[or think of a sexier title yourself]

Some general points: We take incoming students seriously, listen to their interests and concerns, and engage them in the process of designing their own studies. This starts them on the road to becoming independent designers of their own curriculum in the future (within the limits we have to impose on curriculum in this little college). At the same time, we present them with some possible interdisciplinary themes and invite them to choose from those themes, on the basis of their interests, and to work with us to design programs of study. We try to ensure that there are enough opportunities for development of specific knowledge and skills (disciplinary stuff) so they are preparing themselves for their next years.

Faculty and thematic mix: Let's start accumulating a list of everyone who is interested in this idea. Then, sometimes soon, we'll all get together and state some of the kinds of themes we are interested in pursuing under this umbrella--maybe a couple of possibilities from everyone. At this time, we try to envision how various faculty teams and projects might work out, depending on the students' interests, and we see whether we have a reasonable mix of expertises. We then try to twist some arms and/or sweet-talk a few colleagues into joining us.

Preplanning and recruiting: This follows up on Brian Price's vision. We start to develop a sense of this group as a coherent community well before the students arrive. We go out with folks from Admissions and talk to prospective students, try to get them interested in the project and try to ensure that they will fit (they really know what they're getting into, for instance). We also try to create a little newsletter that can be sent out a couple of times, to get students steamed up and create a sense of structure--as much structure as we can possibly build in, to allay freshman fears.

When the students arrive: We might start out with a big retreat, so we get off campus, get isolated for a while, start to develop some feeling of community, and can do some planning without interference. The faculty, at some early point, begin with a show-and-tell; although the students should already know this, we each lay out one or two of the pet ideas that we would love to pursue, and we lay out the kinds of expertise we can bring to teaching and developing those ideas. (For instance, I might lay out my vision of studying the complex of environmental-social-economic issues related to overpopulation and ecological disaster.) If we've done our preparation well, we will have students who are interested in the various possible themes. The students should also understand one underlying purpose of their studies for the year: To learn how to study important questions interdisciplinarily and to get used to the idea that important contemporary issues require interdisciplinary viewpoints. So the first thing they have to do is determine just what their own interests are, what themes they want to pursue, and how they want to make use of faculty expertise. For instance (and here's where they really need faculty guidance), do they want to jump into a theme or issue by starting to read a lot of seminar-type books that discuss aspects of the issue, or do they want to begin with a few weeks of specific disciplinary instruction in economics, biology, and physics? Do they want to develop their mathematical abilities and their abilities to draw, and should this be done through some formal courses built into the program, or through series of workshops, or what?

At the same time that we're developing all these plans for instruction and study, we have

to be sure to address a lot of social and emotional matters. These will, after all, be 17- and 18-year-old freshmen, for whom the whole experience of leaving home will often be difficult. It's going to be important for us to establish some rapport, both among students and between students and faculty. We have to establish the sense that we're advisors, that we're interested in their problems and are here to help them. We don't want to lose students just because of their emotional problems, troubles in the dorms, financial difficulties, drug problems, and the like, even though we make it clear that we don't stand in loco parentis. (We're their older friends and helpers, not their parents.) We need to start establishing some real forums for them to discuss whatever is troubling them, including forums to evaluate program work. (I assume, incidentally, that by sometime in the middle of fall quarter, at the latest, they will have divided themselves into programs, each one with its developing faculty team pursuing some theme; this doesn't exclude some faculty members working with two programs in some way to share their expertise.) We must be sure to bring in all the student support people, in regular forums, to make them aware of the support services; but we want to create an ethos that people should seek help and support within our community first, if possible.

Space and scheduling: We need to have the freedom to design our studies without worrying about times and places. I suggest we talk to scheduling and get a series of rooms that are simply given over to us en bloc, so we have the responsibility for scheduling various groups. If we decide that certain courses are needed that can be attended by students from any program within our group, we'll have to designate some times when courses can be taught and other events don't happen.