11 September 1996

1996-97 Core Faculty Members:

Dear Colleagues,

I didn't have time to talk to you at the spring meeting for folks in Core Programs, but I think the following thoughts are important enough for you to consider them in your planning. This past year, I taught with Brian Price, Stephanie Kozick, and Louise Williams in *The Good Life*. Although our experience, on the whole, was positive, a lot of difficulties arose that we might have avoided with better planning, and if we had only known what to expect. The students we encountered were, on the average, the same kind of bright, enthusiastic Evergreen students I've dealt with for the past 20 years or more, but they also showed some important differences, and I think you should be warned.

Many of the problems we encountered result, I think, from the students' general immaturity and the difficulties of adolescence. For our second week, we went on a retreat to Camp Bishop. Stephanie and I both observed a very disturbing behavior reflecting adolescent self-centeredness and thoughtlessness: When they lined up to fill their plates for a meal, the first people in line (especially the boys[1]) tended to take huge helpings, with little thought for those behind them, who were sometimes left with the dregs. It also became evident that they generally had little conception of how to organize cooking and little inclination to take the initiative and do whatever had to be done. For instance, I was helping my seminar make breakfast one morning; and though I had the advantage of knowing how the griddle worked and what was necessary to making good pancakes, several students seemed surprised when I did "what needed to be done" by taking the initiative to pour and flip pancakes; I just considered that normal responsible adult behavior, but they did not. As a follow-up to this point, it's important to recognize that most of these kids have poorly developed skills for living on their own or with a group of other people who aren't their parents. In addition to knowing little about cooking, they don't know how to choose their food wisely and keep themselves healthy; we must always expect a lot of illness with people from many places coming together in the dorms over the course of a Washington winter, but I'll bet the absences from illness could have been reduced a lot if they just knew how to take care of themselves.

The clincher to the Camp Bishop story came later. As we moved out on Wednesday, the *Molecule to Organism* program moved in; and on Friday, Jude van Buren called me to say that she and Patty Toccalino had stayed in one of the cabins where our students stayed and had found a stash of drug paraphernalia (which she quietly disposed of). Our faculty team met to discuss all these events; and in the general program meeting we discussed the issue of selfishness and developing a sense of group welfare, and then Brian quietly read them the riot act over the drug issue. I should add that in our summer letter, where we told students what to bring in the fall, we specifically warned them *not* to bring drugs and alcohol; but we were obviously naive to think that just issuing that warning would be enough.

As the program went on in the next few weeks, we encountered another problem I had not dealt with before with Evergreen students: frequent non-attendance at program meetings. We did not deal with this well. We were not hard-assed enough (but I'm not used to this being a problem at

[1] I know the Evergreen jargon is "men" and "women," but I can't bear to use those words for most of these students.

Evergreen), but I suggest you deal with the problem head-on, early, and harshly. The matter of attendance was, of course, written into the covenant and into the list of requirements for receiving credit. I put this down to adolescent rebellion against authority, to kids being put into a situation where no one is watching them all the time and they think they can goof off with no consequences. It's important to make it clear right away that there *are* consequences--being kicked out of the program and out of the College, if necessary.

During the fifth week, the whole program went down to the OMSI Field Station in central Oregon for several days, using College vans. For various reasons, the faculty team all went in private cars, without thinking about possible consequences of doing that. For the return trip, Louise was the only one who went in a van, taking a group of students to a museum on the way home. A couple of days later, we got the report from the Motor Pool: vans had been returned in filthy condition, including beer cans, and with interior pieces broken. The people who had to deal with this mess were, of course, incredibly angry, and we had to take the heat. They said they wanted to consider a rule that each van must have one adult in it, and our reply was that we thought we had 15 adults in each van, based on our previous experiences with Evergreen students. Again, Brian had to read them the riot act. Now, ideally, there would have been real consequences for the students themselves; they would have been forced to go over and clean up the vans themselves, and to pay for damage. I think the principal reason that did not happen was a matter of timing--that the vans had already been cleaned up for the next users. Oh, yes--to finish off this little story: We found out that on the return trip one of our student drivers flipped off a truck driver and two of them were stopped and ticketed for speeding in a town close to the camp; one incident was probably linked to the other. Again, an illustration of stupid, childish irresponsibility.

I found one other disturbing characteristic of a number of students: resistance to education. (Some other people teaching Core Programs found the same thing, though I can't detail their experience.) This sounds incredible in people who have supposedly come to college to learn, but it's quite real. Many students came in with a hardened world-view that we (well, I) could not shake, or perhaps one that only gradually mellowed over the year. Some students showed a strong (but rather naive) anti-establishment weltanschauung, which made them resistant to any information that presented a balanced viewpoint. Other students suffered from a general know-it-all attitude, perhaps coupled with anti-parental, anti-authority rebelliousness. I suggest you should also be alert for this phenomenon and think about ways to combat it.

Let me suggest one way we could have headed off some of these problems. The first day, we gave the students a typical huge stack of papers--program syllabus, covenant, discussion of seminar behavior, discussion of writing and keeping field journals, and so on and so on--much too much to digest, although we went over most of it briefly. If the students had assimilated much of the information in those papers, life would have been better, but they did not. My friend and colleague Gordon Beck, with whom I've had some conversations about these matters, has a better method. Gordon, too, has given his students a big stack of papers the first day. He tells them to read it all, but he only deals with it substantively in the *second week,* after everyone has settled down a little. Then he goes over each paper point by point, giving the students time to ask questions; and he continually emphasizes the point that they are all entering into a learning community, where they're expected to work in a certain cooperative atmosphere. That kind of substantive discussion, I think, would have helped the students understand just what kind of community they were entering and what was expected of them.

This letter may leave you anticipating a depressing year; please don't take it that way. On the whole, we had a good year, but it would have been much better if we had anticipated some problems. I leave you with my wishes for a positive year and hope these thoughts will help you.

Best regards,

Burt Guttman