16 July 1987

Patrick Hill
Vice President and Provost
Evergreen

Dear Patrick,

You asked for comments on the proposal from the University of Washington to establish a Bachelor of Clinical Health Services degree. This interesting proposal seems to represent a natural evolution in health©sciences education.
Its approval seems inevitable and appropriate.

The MEDEX program for training of physician assistants (PAs) was initiated during the Viet Nam era, apparently, in large part, as a way of making civilian use of the many returning military corpsmen who already had valuable medical skills. We have had students here with that background who eventually got into PA programs. PAs have filled an important niche in health©care delivery systems. But the supply of military personnel who need a little additional training has just about dried up; it is interesting to see, in Appendix II to this proposal, that the number of female applicants to the MEDEX program has stayed almost constant over the years while the number of male applicants has steadily fallen from a level three times as high, until the two groups are now equal. The application notes that more and more students are interested in getting a bachelors degree of some kind and not simply the more vocational PA certification.

I think we should applaud and support any move to put more broadly educated people into health services. But I wonder if we can give our colleagues at the University any words of advice about strengthening the liberal©arts aspects of their curriculum. Certainly it is very strong in its professional years, and it includes a lot of basic biology and psychology in the pre©professional years. In fact, it leaves room for only 36 credits of electives in the first two years©©less than one good coordinated studies program©©and some of those electives must be used to develop minimal proficiency in mathematics (also a good thing, of course). To satisfy certain other general requirements, those electives must include two "linked sets," one in the biological and behavioral sciences and one from among the other sets listed in the general University Bulletin. I get a little disturbed when I think about these requirements and about what students might take to satisfy them.

I wonder if you remember Max Schulman's old novel “Barefoot Boy with Cheek•,” invwhich the naive young college student is advised to take a mishmosh of everything in the catalog to become "broadly educated." (He thinks he might like to become a writer and is told that with that course of study he couldn't possibly become anything else.) I think that's terrific for someone pursuing

the typical B. A. degree curriculum, which even in the sciences generally has room for a lot of free exploration. Such a student could very well take a linked set of a couple of botany courses and another of some art or German, to
satisfy personal interests; he would emerge with appropriate breadth and a
little depth in some subjects. But here is our poor student trying to become a
PA while satisfying general degree requirements; and I could see him taking the
botany or art or German courses, satisfying some personal interests, but
perhaps not getting the real benefits of a liberal education. With only about
30 credits to play with, he's going to be quite limited anyway. But what ”might•
he do that would really benefit him?

We could wish him a good coordinated studies program (like Human Health and
Behavior?), but let's not waste time dreaming. Among the possible goals of a liberal arts
education (I am taking these thoughts partly from a list that Will
Humphreys recently wrote), two closely related ones stand out as being
realizable for a student in this curriculum: to be able to think about yourself
as a person and to be able to understand other people. Under the first are
such things as knowing your own heritage, knowing the reasons for your beliefs,
and being able to reassess your life; under the second are such things as understanding factors that move and motivate people, understanding them in their particular cultural backgrounds, and being able to empathize with them. Much of the latter should come from the work that these students will be doing
in psychology and in the specific MEDEX courses. But it seems to me that the broader liberal arts goals might be achieved by directing students to certain areas of study, in particular:

©© philosophy, for serious discussion of the great ethical, epistemological and metaphysical issues of life;

©© literature, for a different approach to the same kinds of questions and for insights into people's motivation and character; and to learn to read intelligently for a lifetime;

©© history—at least some courses should help one develop a reasonable perspective of one's heritage and of omnipresent issues [I notice HSTAA 454, 455, 456, and HSTAM 336, as examples].

Certainly there are other topics that would achieve the same goals; I notice
that the University has courses in Women's Studies and in Native American
Studies that would provide some useful perspectives.

But the important point is this: Rather than telling students to take anything
under the sun that interests them, try to direct them toward courses that would
meet at least one important goal of a liberal-arts education that would be
really important to them in their professional and their development as people. Other liberal-goals having to do with political or aesthetic opinions, for instance, are important, but students in this program don't have time for a smattering of everything and they would be better advised to concentrate their work in this way.

Since our sister institution has asked us for comments on their proposal, and
since we are a liberal-arts college, I think something of this kind may be the best advice we can give them.

Sincerely,

Burton S. Guttman