

Comments on "The Evergreen State College: An Experiment Maturing"

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Byron Youtz's paper deals rapidly and well with many of the important issues related to the founding and first decade of our college. Pointed, judicious, and clear, it makes a veteran teacher of English composition admire once more the skills of so many of his colleagues as expository writers. (Is there some sort of correlation between an emphasis on interdisciplinary study and the presence of teachers who care about writing, no matter in which discipline they have received their advanced degrees?) Because, however, of the magnitude of the task Byron has attempted, there remain some phrases to be emphasized and some statements to be qualified. Rather than presenting a competing essay of my own, I give a few remarks here by way of marginal notes.

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"to move with the times" (p.27) -- Some of our colleagues have spoken in the past few years of Evergreen as a creation of the late 1960's and early 1970's, responding to a climate favoring experiment, permissiveness, a "flower-children" syndrome among many potential students, concern with psychological development, and overt political radicalism. If the climate has changed, according to such reasoning, then we must change. I dispute such reasoning. Yes, we could try what we tried because of the openness to experiment. But the principles underlying coordinated studies, especially insofar as the obligations to a central problem, a reading list, and the claims of the group can be traced back to Alexander Meiklejohn's ideas, are not those of permissiveness. Nor is the emphasis upon obligations in individual learning contracts. The planners of Evergreen, in effect, used an opportunity offered by the times to work toward sound and noble educational aims.

Many of us believed when we came here that the organization of undergraduate learning primarily by faculty departments representing professional academic specialties was ineffective. Control of curricula by departments was questionable in the 1920's, the 1940's, and the 1960's. I submit that it remains questionable in the 1980's, especially for a college which does not have specialized vocational training --- including prepping a large number of students directly for graduate study--as its main mission. Persisting in our principles, therefore, is not merely a subjective issue of maintaining our "identity". We must continue to act on our best perceptions of what is right to do. Richard Jones has well said (Experiment at Evergreen, p.130 of typescript) that "the experiment at Evergreen became not only a reaction to the problematic 60's but an action which was organically rooted in an articulate and instructive past."

"the intent of the Legislature" (p.3) -- Byron has done his homework to find on paper something which indicates a mandate for our innovative planning. Historically, the mandate to fresh thinking given orally by Senator Sandison and Governor Evans was not written into any official charter. Those of us representing the college early on in budget justifications and public relations speeches soon learned not to say "we have been given the mandate" but "we have accepted the challenge" to be different. From the mid-seventies onward, however, we have had the twofold mandate, firmly legislated as part of the CPE long-range plan, to be the alternative campus for the whole state while providing essential services to Southwestern Washington. It may not be too much to say that any lasting contribution we shall make to higher education in America will depend upon how inventively and usefully we reconcile the two sections of our mandate.

"the exclusion of the other two elements of the founding intent" (p.3) -- This exclusion came not from any nefarious design but from the sheer difficulty in the early years of setting up and running coordinated studies as the main curricular function of the college. Though from the first year of teaching onward, we set up individual and "cluster" contracts and internships and reverse internships reaching out well beyond the campus, we had to establish our base first. Once the crucial educational-planning meeting of February, 1970 had decided to stake almost everything on coordinated studies for our first years of teaching, the hiring of the planning faculty, the investment of time in the planning year of 1970-1971, and the recruiting of the rest of the opening-year teaching faculty---all these proceeded from the commitment to interdisciplinary learning by teams on campus. For most Evergreeners, I believe---or at least hope----that the emphasis in the later 1970's upon expanding our services to the region is not so much "changing with the times" as "taking care of unfinished business".

"To avoid decision-making squabbles of many of the earlier educational experiments" (p.7) -- I cannot emphasize too strongly how important it was to have in our planning year the wisdom of those who came to us from "earlier educational experiments" which either had failed or were wavering. Especially on the issue of governance, our first-year students might have been seduced from the difficult tasks of coordinated studies into the easier and superficially more exciting ways of educational-political argument. Byron, Will Humphreys, and our other veterans saved us from those pit-falls. Indeed, it may not be all that wrong to maintain that we are still around because we were one of the last innovative colleges to open.

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If we had opened earlier, idealism untempered by experience might have led us into quicksand. If we had been forced by circumstances to plan for a later opening of the college, it is doubtful if we should have opened at all.

"almost ready to open" (p.7) -- Nothing would seem to demonstrate so much the soundness of basic design of an organism than its ability to respond to crises. This was one of them: the need to open the instructional program of the college almost a month before we could take up residence on the campus. Had we committed ourselves to multiple courses, class-bells, and the rest of the educational traffic-management system which prevails at almost all undergraduate colleges, we should have been lost. Delay of a month would have meant loss of a quarter, which almost certainly would have necessitated delay of our opening for a year, which might have meant a legislative decision not to go ahead with Evergreen at all.

Byron does not mention another crisis, to which we have made not an optimal but at least a passable adjustment: the legislative decision in the spring of 1973 to put a ceiling on our enrollment and then to let us grow only to some 4000 students rather than to the 10,000 student enrollment which had been predicated in the planning. In the long run, we shall probably be grateful that, however tardily, the legislature recognized the errors which had been made in demographic projections and thus limited us to a more humane maximum size. The decision, however, did much to slow down the momentum we had built up in recruiting students, and it played hob with our plans for recruitment of a faculty capable of representing the range of experience we need. Yet we are still here.

"Interdisciplinary Specialty Areas" (pp.11-13) -- Some internal specialization was needed for efficient planning, the use of resources, and continuity. But having proliferated these growths, we must be vigilant and continually examine them to make sure that they are benign. The possibility for malignancy and metastasis is always there. (I even worry a bit about the designation of Annual Programs as "frankly experimental", for a strong Annual Program should respond to an objective problem or issue which presses upon us and the logic of which requires the collaboration of teachers from two or more specialty areas. Not so much "Let's try it" as "We need to do it".

I believe that the most important debates about educational philosophy and policy do not take place among people but within people. It's not so much a matter of good guys and bad guys, or generalists vs. specialists in meetings. Rather, it's a matter of arguing with ourselves. Departmental and divisional structures, particularly when they are connected with external rewards, have a way of inhibiting such argument, of stunting collegial citizenship. What to do about the tendency of the "categories to harden" ? Plan and staff Basic and Annual Programs first. Assume the priority of interdisciplinary and even inter-specialty-area work, and keep the burden of proof squarely on any claims that we have to do something a certain way because "the field" requires it.

"divest the institution of its unsuccessful teachers" (p.22) and "some system of merit pay for outstanding service" (p.23) -- Byron's account is accurate, as far as it goes. We continue to have difficulties with the relative lack of options. In effect, a faculty member is either forced to go down the road or else advances in salary with seniority no matter whether the job done is

excellent or just passable. Other colleges can juggle ranks and "merit steps" and even such a holding position as tenure-without-advancement for a good soldier who never wants to lead anything. Trapped by our own ideals, we cannot. For good or ill, we have no half-way houses. (Yet I admit that I cannot now think of a solution which would not, in fostering wasteful competitive games and even internecine strife, be worse than the problem.)

"career oriented.....We must prepare students in many of the conventional fields of study" (p.27) -- Yes. But we must always ask "Why?". The emphasis should continually be upon the problems of our society, our polity, our culture, our eco-system rather than upon the claims of conventional "fields" as self-interested, self-perpetuating organizations. We shall be sending students to graduate and other professional schools. But we should resist the all-too-prevalent tendency to let the graduate-school tail wag the undergraduate dog.

So far as the important issues of careers and employment are concerned, I continue to believe that a B.A. stands for something more than the mastery of a collection of routines for performing specific tasks according to the "state of the art". It should stand for the difference between "staff mentality" ---the ability to carry out tasks assigned by others without the habit of asking or understanding "Why?"-- and the capacity to make decisions based upon rounded knowledge and hard-won principles. As we ask about the success of our graduates, we must continually analyze what we mean by "success".

(The highest grades in a course on ethics taught at Williams College by the Reverend William Sloane Coffin were earned by Jeb Stuart Magruder.)

"we are still surprisingly faithful and true to our original ideals" (p.16) and "it is the diversity of those reforms, which we have collected together and rationalized, that gives us our durability and attractiveness" (p.17) -- These strike me as Byron's most powerful statements about our present condition and the reasons for our vitality. Though there may be many tendencies to do the right thing for the wrong reason (e.g. extending services to more varied clienteles not because it is our duty and we believe in it but simply to show higher enrollment figures), I submit that our principles are still remarkably intact. We should stand and fight for them. What we should continually adjust to "the times" are our particular rationalizations, the interpretation of our principles to our audiences and to ourselves. Easy to say, hard to do. Yet I cannot think of a more necessary or productive ground for discussions than continuing to ask "Why?". Neither "because that's the way we've always done it" or "because that's the way others do it" should be acceptable answers in an institution of higher learning.

Yet we have amassed a fund of experience here in the last ten years, and we should make use of it. Pete Sinclair was right when, in the spring of 1973, he observed in a dean-faculty-group meeting that we had all been trying to act as if we had no habits. So fearful that we would impose upon the new college unanalyzed routines brought from other places, we tried to avoid any habitual behavior; and an organism can't live that way for long. Now I shall paraphrase Pete's remark and close with what I said last summer to an outside observer who had asked if Evergreen was becoming "more traditional". My answer: "Yes. But to a surprising extent, they're our own traditions."

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