

REPORT OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL CREDIT AND ACCELERATION OF CREDIT DTF

We think Evergreen should give people credit for things they learn outside of college -- if that learning resembles what college students get credit for while enrolled. Our reasons: there are many adults who need a degree and are prepared to work hard and well for one, who are handicapped by credit being tied mechanically to time; it would bring more adults onto campus and into the regular curriculum; the Council on Higher Education staff recently charged Evergreen to do it; and our regular curriculum and teaching will benefit if we can make progress in answering the basic questions, "What do we give credit for? What does a bachelor degree stand for anyway?"

We recommend Evergreen continue its present ways of giving external credit, namely through CLEP general and specific-subject tests, AP tests, and others.

But we have also been exploring and developing another method for people who have been out of school a year or more to earn credit for what they learned in their jobs or lives. This is a system whereby a person writes a paper or report that demonstrates what he or she knows and wants credit for. For those who might have trouble writing, we have been developing not just counseling but a module specifically designed to help them produce an acceptable paper or report.

Here are the reasons behind our approach: Some colleges give credit for previous experience; e.g., "I was two years in the Peace Corps," or "I ran a business for ten years," or "I climbed Mt. McKinley." But we feel we can't evaluate experience in itself. Someone could say, "I learned just as much living with my mother for two years -- it was just as intense an educational experience as if I'd climbed Mt. McKinley," and one could neither agree nor disagree without going on to explore the effects of the experience. Experience in itself cannot be evaluated.

Thus some colleges have turned away from mere statements of experience and settled on giving credit for documented skills. But this leaves the problem of deciding which skills are valid: skiing? basketweaving? car repair? raising children? arithmetic? One can reasonably argue both Yes and No for each of those cases. Also, there is the problem of how to document certain skills such as skiing or child raising.

We conclude that Evergreen should not give credit for experience or skills in themselves, but rather for demonstrating understanding: conscious, conceptual, verbal understanding. Operationally, this means explaining and communicating what the person knows so that someone else who doesn't understand it can do so. This seems to us one of the main functions of learning and college, and one of the main things people need in the rest of their lives. And when someone's experience, skills, or knowledge is put in the form of conscious verbal understanding -- an extended paper or report -- then it becomes feasible for a committee to make a fair decision about how much college credit to give.

We realize, however, that this procedure is a disadvantage to people who deserve external credit because they know a lot, but who have been alienated from all schools and school-like activities. We feel we have developed a module that will help such people get the credit they deserve.

HOW IT WOULD WORK

We propose an office of external credit -- preferably part of an expanded learning resource center. All students would be alerted to the possibilities of external credit. A counselor would help students assess whether they might be eligible to earn external credit and the various ways of earning it. The counselor would show students directions and models for writing a report or paper that would earn external credit.

Some students would be able to produce such papers right away. Many others would need to come to four or five meetings of a module, which is specifically for the purpose of learning to explore and articulate things that someone knows tacitly or implicitly but cannot yet articulate or communicate. And some other people would need to come to the module for the whole quarter, especially those people who have trouble writing. (The module is also designed to help those who need writing skills.)

In addition to the paper or report, candidates would be asked where relevant to submit other supporting material: a statement of how the knowledge was gained and any material that might help support and illustrate the report. For example, a painter might submit paintings, a musician recordings, an architect blueprints.

A small committee would evaluate the application and make its decision. If a person were not granted credit, he or she could get feedback from the committee and revise the application to turn it in again -- any number of times.

The committee should not be too large and needs to build up experience and continuity in making judgments. We suggest that it have one member of the faculty from each of the four subject-matter divisions, one student and one staff member. It should work closely with the registrar who should be a member ex-officio. The faculty member teaching the module should be a non-voting member and function as an advocate for applicants. The committee can draw on other members of the faculty -- or people from outside the faculty -- when it needs special advice. Faculty members could be drawn from the contract pool and have their load slightly reduced for those terms when the committee sits, for it will be a time-consuming effort. The committee need not sit for more than one or two quarters a year, however. There should be a slow rotation of membership -- perhaps one new member each quarter it meets -- so there is plenty of continuity. But we recommend starting with the present DTF since it has built up some experience.

PROPOSED GUIDELINES

External credit should not duplicate other credit; e.g., someone should not get CLEP credit for algebra if he already got credit for that algebra when he transferred from another college, or learned it as part of his participation in an Evergreen program or contract.

External credit should be sought within the first year of a person's enrollment at Evergreen -- or within a year of the person's return after a year's leave of absence. (If, however, a student wants to study for a CLEP subject matter exam during a vacation or a leave of absence, he may take such an exam later in his Evergreen career.)

Evergreen should not allow accelerated credit. That is, a full-time student should not earn more than four units or their equivalent per term or 16 per year. This means no contracts for more than four units per quarter, no extra credit for a module for full-time students, and no transfer credit for courses taken in another college while enrolled here full time. See the last section of this report for our reasoning on acceleration.

The new program for demonstrating knowledge through a report or paper is especially useful for adults who want a large piece of credit for something they may have learned over many years -- something that doesn't neatly fit college credit divisions. For the initial trial period of this program, we ask for the following regulations: that only people who have been out of school for a year or more be eligible; that credit be granted only in blocks of 4, 8 or 12 Evergreen units (we feel that only gross estimates are possible in this new process); and no more than 12. We request these guidelines in a spirit of admitted caution and conservatism.

This is a tricky area.* We must be in a sense unfair: we will perhaps not yet grant credit for something that, after we learn more about what we are doing, we might later grant credit. In particular, we hope it will not be too long until adults of especially wide knowledge can get 2, 3 -- why not 4? -- years' credit for what they have already learned. But these quantitative judgments seem so difficult and vague now that we wish to start with a maximum of one year. (In special circumstances, exceptions would be possible.)

* The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, in a report that favors the development of nontraditional ways of earning credit, recommends that colleges and universities not give credit too easily for "life experience." See TOWARD A LEARNING SOCIETY: ALTERNATIVE CHANNELS TO LIFE WORK AND SERVICE, McGraw Hill, 1973; reported in THE CHRONICAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION, 10-1-73.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the implications for the student? How will other institutions view external credit?

Who knows: Some institutions view our regular credit with suspicion. A student with Evergreen external credit will be safer if he or she plans to stay and graduate from Evergreen. Nevertheless external credit for out-of-college learning is starting to be given by many state and private colleges throughout the nation.

2. Isn't the emphasis on writing unfair? Writing isn't the only medium for demonstrating understanding.

We are asking people not just to show evidence of understanding, but actually to communicate their understanding -- to explain what they know. And we feel it is appropriate, for college academic credit, to emphasize writing as a way to communicate understanding. We feel we have removed the handicap that often goes along with a requirement for a written paper by giving sustained help to the person in preparing the paper, and taking away any penalty for early unsuccessful efforts.

3. Why not give external credit for having had a job? As things now stand, a regular Evergreen student can get two or three years' credit just for having a job and a sponsor -- and perhaps virtually no contact at all with the sponsor.

We feel it would undermine the credibility of external credit if people could walk in and get credit for nothing but having been employed. Perhaps after we understand things better, it will make sense to allow people up to one year credit for employment-- perhaps not. At the start, we want to be conservative.

4. Why not just let all Evergreen faculty give external credit by assessing students in their field? For example, a student who has already read and studied a lot of literature at home would come to the literature person who would decide how much credit to give.

These quantitative measurements are so subjective that a "free enterprise" system would produce unfair chaos that would encourage students to wander around to see who will give them the best price. And indeed some teachers have said they are willing to give any student as much credit as the student thinks fair. This attitude may be rational in the context of Evergreen's regular curriculum -- where a student earns no more than 4 units per quarter and where we often do ask the student to assess whether or not he or she learned. But the same attitude and procedure would entirely undermine the external credit procedure.

We feel it will be fairer and more consistent if these decisions are made by a committee that has built up some experience and which represents various points of view.

5. If you believe so much in people getting credit for what they know, why don't you want to allow accelerated credit for students while they are enrolled? Clearly some people learn faster and know more than others. They ought to get external credit and not be penalized just because they are enrolled full time.

When the DTF was originally formed last year, it was called the Accelerated Credit DTF, and its original charge was to decide on a policy concerning accelerated credit. Last year the DTF decided against having accelerated credit, and this year with a somewhat new membership, the same conclusion was reached.

We do recommend a kind of "almost accelerated" credit, that students be able to get credit for CLEP subject-matter tests at any time in their college career -- asking merely that the learning for those tests occur during vacations or leaves of absence. It's a request we feel we can make in good faith even though it obviously can't be policed.

But at the start, anyway, we feel strongly that there should be a sharp distinction between regular credit for current learning while enrolled, and external credit for previous learning. There's nothing so central to Evergreen's regular curriculum than the fact that we don't continually measure and quantify learning. We don't reward students for trying to compete with each other on a numerical scale. The quantification of learning into numerical units is what hinders learning and teaching so much in conventional schools. Evergreen is founded on a refusal to do this even though there is a price for this emphasis on learning over credit. It's not a good system for a student who wants to pile up a lot of credits in a hurry. Such a student can do better at a conventional college where all learning is quantified. Evergreen insists that whatever students do in one quarter (as long as they do some irreducible minimum) they get 4 units. No more or no less. To give more or less is to sneak back into numerical grading (5 credits equals "A", 4 credits equals "B/C", and 3 credits equals "D").

The reason we want to keep external credit separate from regular credit is because external credit is directly contrary to those principles. External credit by definition means measuring learning, not teaching. It means quantifying and certifying knowledge, taking a unique organic piece of human learning and deciding how many points to give it. External credit is thus in a real sense "unEvergreen," and it would be rational for Evergreen to stay out of it if there weren't compelling reasons to get involved.

We feel we should make an exception for CLEP subject-matter tests since they are so focused and discrete and suitable for upper classmen, and allow upper classmen to add credit by studying for them during vacations and leaves of absence. But, if we were to invite full-time students to study for them while taking part in regular programs or contracts, we would be inviting students to dilute their involvement in their program or contract. We would be back in a situation many of us know from conventional colleges

where you are teaching a non-graded course to students who are also taking graded courses. Students are inevitably encouraged to put more of their time and commitment into the numerically graded activity where the emphasis is on measurement and testing.

But in the long run we feel external credit and the regular curriculum may be brought together to their mutual benefit. The giving of external credit may help us finally know more what we mean by credit and by a bachelor degree so that eventually we will be able to say to a student, "When you can do x, y, and z, we will give you a degree. If you are energetic, well prepared, and quick, you get the degree in a hurry." Then real acceleration will be possible without undermining the teaching function, since the teaching function will be separate from the credit-giving function.* On the other hand, perhaps the experiment in granting external credit will show that to be an unrealistic goal.

* See the article on this matter, "SHALL WE TEACH OR GIVE CREDIT? A MODEL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION," by Peter Elbow, Soundings, Fall, 1971