

VITAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES: WHAT'S THE RIGHT CLIMATE?

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The Evergreen State College goals are well enough defined to suggest a requisite climate. We think that vital undergraduate studies will spring from these goals and this climate; we'd very much appreciate your reaction to both. Such presentation tends to the abstract; of the specifics which underlie, we have some in mind, of many, we yet do not. Perhaps our discussion will reveal more. In any case, these matters must be decided by faculty, staff, and prospective students in the next two years.

I shall be talking principally about the inner climate, that which the Evergreen community has within its purview. But, not enough appreciated by academic communities, the outer climate has critical effect on the inner. Before I go further, I shall briefly and oversimply, but not distortingly, describe Evergreen's outer climate.

After the Washington legislature authorized a new college, the first in seventy-one years, legislators and others requested the college's founders to avoid creating a carbon copy of existing institutions. The request arose from a sophistication which refrains from stratifying in the face of custom and example, which refrains from centralizing control for quick cookbook answers to complex needs and which recognizes the need for options in the complex society that Washington has become. Such sophistication, needless to say, comes only from distinction already present in the existing universities and colleges.

The constraints put on Evergreen were that the charter did not authorize the Ph.D. degree (which we do not consider a hindrance so long as undergraduate studies need full attention), that Evergreen should grow fairly rapidly in order to accommodate expected large enrollments at the southern end of Pugetopolis, and that Evergreen would make a special effort to serve the needs of state government and, of course, that it would operate within common levels of state funding. On the outer climate that we prefer, we all agree: It should support unlimited desires with no strings attached. The Washington climate is far from that, but having as it does a remarkable facility in getting performances (the plural must be emphasized) without recourse to central bureaucracy, it represents to my knowledge one of the few encouraging civic climates for developing new options in public higher education. How long the outer climate stays propitious is a question; one certain influence--which academics neglect also--will be the effect of the inner on the outer climate. I'll return to this briefly in closing, but now to Evergreen's goals and climate.

VITAL, that word from my title which will sneak into my text with synonyms like "alive" and "lively," serves the same nefarious uses that embracing words like "nature" and "natural" always have. To use the word can put one in the arational position of a vitalist, one who believes that phenomena are produced by vital principles distinct from chemical or physical forces, and using the word can also put one squarely in that regrettable, today epidemic, condition of thereby banishing all one's opponents from the world one constructs.

To both charges I certainly have to admit that I'm using the word "vital" as an antonym for dead; but to the charge of sweeping the world clean through rhetoric, I plead innocent. We think of Evergreen not as the answer to all but simply as a new option for many undergraduates and faculty, in numbers large enough to make Evergreen viable as a state institution. For undergraduate studies to be vital for them and for faculty, they need more available, live, genuine choices, not simply additional service stations.

Taking up the charge, the Evergreen board of trustees, an advisory committee and I (David G. Barry, The Evergreen State College; John Bevan, University of the Pacific; Ernest Boyer, State University of New York at Albany; Stanley Idzerda, College of St. Benedict; Roger Malek, Arthur D. Little, Inc.; Warren Martin, University of California; John Stewart, John Muir College; John Silber, University of Texas; William Warren, Antioch College; Robert Jenks, student - University of California; Tim Dugan, student - University of Washington; Carl Mills, student - Central Washington State College; and J. Maarten Ultee, student - Reed College) wrestled with a statement of goals. We discussed goals in view of the plight of undergraduate studies, the life of which has been squeezed out by the pressure of vocationalism on the one hand and of the liberal arts-general education pressures on the other. Vocationalism has pretended that an undergraduate could be "trained" to enter professional or semi-professional work, but the undergraduate found that, after he had the Bachelor's degree (in some highly specific occupation), what he found on the job had little to do with what he did in college; the general educationalists or liberal artists, on the other hand, have claimed that no one is educated unless he has this and that, according to the myth which someone has put beautifully, that no one comes from high school knowing anything and everyone must know everything by the time he graduates, which of course must be no more or less than four years later.

American college catalog statements of goals vary from the noble elegantly put to the impossible patently stated. All, however, commonly tend to promise placing the graduate within a millimeter of his proper position on the Chain of Being. We didn't say that these colleges aren't in touch with many realities and some ideals. We agreed, however, that there's room for another simplified choice rearing on other realities and perhaps reachable ideals consistently pursued. On realities, for example, that undergraduates change their intentions more than once between the time they think about a major for the first time and when they graduate, and that it's a rare person who ten years later is in the career he envisioned as a senior in college. As the ideal consonant with these two realities, I'd like to emphasize simply

the goal of development of mind long cherished by all colleges but confused too often with, and depressed or deflected by, pressures to acquire either the occupational skills of scholarship or of the professions.

Our statement of goals will go something like this:

This college has collected scholars and experts who, insofar as they inquire in their fields of interest, will by their presence here together form a living link between our present society and the past, a source of power with which to help us all meet the future. Students will work as colleagues with faculty and others, and together these people will try (that word is emphasized because it involves all of the college's people in continual change) to create a place whose graduates can as adults be undogmatic citizens and uncomplacently confident individuals in a changing world.

We assume that toward this end the most valuable service Evergreen can offer is to initiate a process of continuing learning by preparing a student with the methods of learning and experimentation, by encouraging independence in pursuit of inquiries that interest and motivate him, and by providing him with counsel and resources to test this knowledge and ability. Put negatively, we do not intend to stamp a "product" with the brand of a particular academic elite nor of a narrowly conceived vocation.

The only college requirement for the B.A. degree may be 36 units (each roughly equivalent to the level of reading and writing required for a stringent five quarter credits) with relatively few of these units, we hope, accumulated by sitting before an instructor five days a week. A student would progress on his own terms in view of his own objectives, motivations, learning style and ability. The mode of instruction would slant toward seminars in the first two years, with gradual but nonetheless rapid weaning toward programmed self-study, tutorials, and increasing independent work with admixtures of regular classes and large lectures (the lectures would not be "classes"). We would like to avoid lower division and upper division "courses," making the level of sophistication and independence expected of each student commensurate with his ability. We hope that subjects of study would be student initiated, student-faculty and faculty initiated with rather less emphasis on the last. In areas of inquiry generally found under the headings of natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, particular emphasis would be given, we expect, to those areas which can take best advantage of the college's location at the seat of state government.

Units could also be generated by work-study. In the absence of vocational curricula, we must provide for young people direct access into the working world. Job experience wouldn't be required but would be highly recommended, especially for those with proclivities to certain jobs or professions where we or the student could arrange appropriate experience accompanied by reading. A program like this on the scale and quality required will be tremendously difficult to build but well worth the effort.

The extremes of student progress to the degree would be highly specialized on the one hand and definitely exploratory on the other, with the great majority probably, since they would have some vocational ends in mind or requirements set by graduate schools, etc., following more traditionally structured patterns. We intend, however, that the structures be ad hoc, arranged for short-term purposes and subject to change by students and faculty with a minimum of red tape.

What happens in a place and its climate are mutually determining. For example, climate both produces and results from the kind of faculty we have and the kind of arrangements they set up between themselves and students: A schematic of student interests balanced against faculty competences would have at its zero end a situation where students expecting undergraduate agriculture, for example, wouldn't come to Evergreen, where there is no agriculture faculty. Off the scale at the other end is the ideal situation where every student interested in the most esoteric subdivision of one of the fields we nominally offer will find as much faculty talent as he wishes to exploit. Less ideally, but minimally, mathematics interests, for example, should reasonably match the strength of mathematics faculty, and so on in each of the fields represented at Evergreen. To approximate this state of affairs which is always assumed, but really found only in the breach, students ought to progress through individually arranged programs (some satisfying curiosity, some anticipating professional or graduate school, some careers in commerce and industry) ought to be matched with contiguous interests of other students and with the sometimes-stretched talents of the faculty on scene at the moment. By stretched talents, I'm talking about a competent man stretched because he is interested both in the subject and in students curious about it. (What gets "taught" in this situation is how competence increases itself.) I'm not talking about incompetence claiming omnipotence or about weak people being told to teach whatever there is to be taught.

We think a vigorous climate results from an organic relationship between faculty-student competence and student-faculty questions. The problem we face can be put another, less abstract, way by the question, How vital will the climate be for those people who come to Evergreen the year the first class graduates--the class finishing in our seventh year, say. If faculty and students that year are going through the same motions as those in our first year or two or three, then we're a failure. Our option, if successful, will be characterized by a catalog announcing the year before, not necessarily the year after. The seventh year would have a student with the same set of interests that a person in the first class might have had. But he ought to be pursuing that interest through a different set of instructional modes because the numbers of contiguous interests weren't the same, because strengths of the faculty that year were a bit different, and because society itself had moved forward a bit.

I'm not talking here about change for change's sake, but rather about keeping minds--older minds, young minds--in that equilibrium (or creative tension)

that's also governed by what's happening in society and in the disciplines. We must find a way of keeping this kind of equilibrium and quit answering the problem by static curricula changed only with great pain every ten years (with luck), then only because stresses and strains have become unendurable. Our climate needs loose organizational structure and instructional modes which in turn permit great flexibility in faculty effort; all this achieving equilibrium at the point of student needs and faculty competence.

To maintain a wide range of fluidly assigned instructional modes, aggregations of people and budget must be kept loose. A sampling of potential clots:

Administrators who work comfortably only in rigid line arrangements; unresponsive, even incompetent bureaucracies build up and get "protected" from dissolution.

Student organizational control of funds; where the myth of separate "student affairs" is supported by law, what began as a fillip to offset too rigid administration has already become a monstrous clot.

Tenure, when it goes beyond protection of academic freedom to job security come hell or high water.

The "course," a piece like granite (and sometimes as digestible) to be added, never subtracted, almost always implying a block of time and space to be "manned"; expensive collections of them, that is to say those with few students, often too few, are balanced off by cheap collections, those with many, often too many.

Much of the above can be rationalized or defended, but once you start with different premises, new choices open up. Once faculty, students and administrators are equally represented in governance, different policy and feedback systems may make it possible to shorten decision-making routes, avoid line bottlenecks. Funds become college funds, not shop preserves. Once the "course" cracks, much red tape will fall. Once permanent accretions of courses are abolished, it is definitely possible to have every freshman in seminars, and this within the usual student-faculty ratio for the public colleges and universities of Washington.

Our climate would require some change in the up-to-now commonly held expectations in certain disciplines, but no more change than many in those disciplines now are working for--as, for example, efforts in the sciences to reach to the non-major, or in the social sciences to question needless serialization. Extreme demands on the faculty member's time--in preparation, tutorials and advising--will be offset by great flexibility in the ways he arranges his time, so that blocks can be reserved for his furthering study and research. Further, the level of vitality, the living change and consequently the total level of productiveness will be increased if we can encourage relationships which will further faculty respect for "para-faculty"--librarians, counselors, work-study advisors--all of whom in this environment will be as helpful to its goals as the "faculty" proper.

This ambience requires clear air, no murky corners where colleagues and outsiders wonder what's going on. I refer not only to those faculty contra faculty and faculty contra administration hassles resulting from simple lack of communication, but also to those areas where people would prefer not to know what's going on; as an example, what the community is doing for and to the students who come, spend time and leave.

We must develop meticulous patterns for evaluation of faculty and administrators, as well as of students. We'll need new, clearer, more demanding understandings about tenure; perhaps, rather, enforcement of current understandings. We must guarantee working-life incomes to only those who can stay lively and shifty enough to keep their own intellectual goals out ahead of themselves and ahead of this year's students, not some imaginary ones of the time just after the faculty member left graduate school.

Such controlled chaos is not for every administrator nor for every faculty member, much less for every student, for the freedoms implied by our plan call for substantial, but we think reasonable, amounts of self-discipline. If faculty and administration do not fall into the easily assumed roles that rigid systems allow, neither will students. But in affairs of the mind and spirit, one man's benzedrine is another's morphine, so we do not present ours as the answer to all problems, rather as a choice that must be good in order to take its place among the several already in Washington.

I mentioned self-discipline to return us briefly to the outer climate. While an alternative such as ours has become nearly impossible in many states so could it too in the rest including Washington if we are not scrupulously responsible for the ways we spend our resources. The society which controls the outer climate will not continue support of an institution which talks in terms of teaching hours and money and not of responsibilities and which becomes ever more rigid in the face of growing inconsistencies. Conversely, if we exhibit honestly what happens and how we progress toward our goals, and if our progress is maintained within commonly agreed upon levels of economy, we should not be timid in reminding powers in the outer climate that their rigidities are as death-dealing as ours.

I must mention one further link between the inner and outer climate, this applying to a large segment of the academic world, but one to which a tender new beginner like Evergreen, more than casually concerned with government and public affairs, must be particularly sensitive. I refer to a vocal cadre of academics who call for the college to politicize itself, to commit itself actively in political causes. That we must be individually committed politically and free to express those commitments, is of course; but to allow the college, as an institution, to become a political battleground and tool will soon render it impotent.

The society controlling the outer climate simply will not stand for an academic community which in addition to being rigid, becomes a political force expecting immunity. I hope we'll be able to convince some otherwise very desirable faculty and students of this; if we cannot, the hedging

by bureaucratic restrictions will be so great that vitality will surely ebb. Even if we still have "academic freedom," life will have moved elsewhere.

Many agree that new selections must be created before public higher education calcifies into chains of dispensaries. Evergreen has aroused some interest as a sensible and possible option. But it is only possible; making Evergreen a fact will demand much from all who join it, all interested parties who surround it. The work--and I mean pulling and tugging work--will be worthwhile if Evergreen opens up other ways in which American public undergraduate studies might operate.