

Charlie Teske
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
Interview 4, November 11, 2016
FINAL

Fiksdal: Okay, Charlie. We're ready for our fourth [Fiksdal says "fifth"] interview.

Teske: Okay, I wanted to go back a little bit to this meeting that I regard as all important. It occurred on February 8 and 9 of 1970. Merv Cadwallader, Don Humphrey and I had met the first time the day before. And, as I wrote—this is available [in the Archives]; if a person goes to the Evergreen homepage, and in the search slot, types in Planning Conference, February 8 and 9, 1970—one of the things that will be entered here is Summary of Academic Planning Conference, February 8, 1970-Teske. And this is my beginning statement:

For a day and a half, the President, Vice Presidents, Deans and some Directors met in the temporary prefabricated Library Building to decide upon the broad outlines of the curriculum to be offered in the early years of the Evergreen State College.

The President, Vice Presidents and Trustees, aided by an advisory board drawn from around the country, had arrived at some definitions of goals, and at some firm principles about what Evergreen should not be. But they were waiting for the appointment of the first three Academic Deans, who would be directly responsible for administering the curriculum, before defining the kinds of programs which would be offered, and the conditions of learning and teaching. The Academic Deans, all of whom were still functioning at other institutions, at first met each other on Saturday, February 7. Now it was time to put something specific inside the frame, which had already been drawn.

Not only was there pressure from outside, political and public, to announce how the college would provide educational options for its students, it was imperative to make some firm decisions, so that the Academic Deans-elect could start to recruit the 18 or 19 Planning Faculty Members, who would be working through the academic years '70-'71, before the arrival of the first students in the fall of '71.

What kinds of faculty members do we wish to recruit, and what would we tell them about the work they would be doing? How should the interior spaces of the vast Library Building—still mainly a hole in the ground—be defined to serve an academic program? What could we announce to prospective students?

The conference resulted in the commitment of the college in its early years to the theme-oriented, team-taught, interdisciplinary arrangements later called Coordinated Studies Programs, complemented by the offering of individual learning contracts, some of them including internships. In effect, the conference set the guidelines for the main and most distinctive academic features of the college, which have persisted to this day.

In other words, a very important day and a half. You will also find, if you go to Academic

Planning Conferences, a memorandum to President McCann from the Office of the Provost—that's David Barry, the conference chairman. Subject: Summary of Academic Planning Conference.

Dave excerpts some of Introductory Remarks for Planning, Phase 2, Charles McCann, President. It was a statement that Charlie had written out that he presented at the beginning of the conference, which stated the broad outlines. Now, the big thing that Charlie had no idea about—interdisciplinary, team-taught, full-time. Charlie's main emphasis was, "We should be pleased if our graduate turns out to be a generalist, or one familiar with one of today's great problems, and satisfied, if he's a specialist, even a narrow one. Terms like 'breadth' and 'depth' requirements will have no place here, since they assume that the B.A. is, on one hand, the end of all education, or, in a few cases, not even the beginning, but simply a prep school for real learning later."

Now, no departments; generally, the traditional disciplines—the natural, social sciences, humanities and arts. And Charlie was very much interested—he even said at some point—I don't think it's in here, but in something else—he wrote that if the majority of our students in their fourth years are not doing individual projects, we failed.

So I felt a particular burden on me, because I had been brought in because of my beginning experience in working, not full-time, but in working with, at Oberlin, the private reading courses, and then some full-time, month-long ventures during the Oberlin January term.

At any rate, that, Charlie said at the very beginning. And then Dave, at the end, looking back—this memo is dated February 17—looking back, Dave said, about the discussion, "It was agreed that the faculty would be assigned by the Provost and Council of Deans to plan for and to serve in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary project groups or task forces. The groups could vary in numbers of both faculty and students. Each faculty person would generally be responsible for giving educational leadership to 18 to 20 students. The groups would be organized around a limited number of agreed-upon "central themes." And he gives some examples of what might happen, what he had in mind—"Crises in Western Civilization."

"It is recognized also that subject groups could be formed from within the theme group as time and interest would indicate appropriate," and so forth.

And then the alternative was: "The other track options would have to be made available for some students whose level of maturity, experience and career interests would enable them to move directly into special areas of knowledge." And here, we did call it "contract programming."

And let me insert here, Susan, something I feel pretty strongly about. There can be no such thing as an "independent" contract. By definition, contracts are binding; they are not independent. What we

are talking about is an individual contract for independent study. And, as you might imagine, through the years, it has really grated on me that people walk around talking about independent contracts. That's like saying "state worker" or "military intelligence." You know? [laughter] It's an oxymoron, and it should be avoided. Okay, I—

Fiksdal: Well, you know now they're clearly called individual learning contracts.

Teske: Yes. Okay, that mollifies me.

Fiksdal: And a lot of people just call them ILCs.

Teske: My goodness.

Fiksdal: Which I always have to think, now, wait a minute, what is that?

Teske: Like DTFs. Yeah.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Teske: Okay. Okay. Well, this leaps way ahead to something I hope that we can get to sometime in a later session, and that is a question that we were asked by a very great man, who turned out to be a very good friend of ours. What he said was, "Are you in danger of sliding back into traditional learning?" That was one of his main questions.

And I thought about that, and my answer was—and it's on paper somewhere in something that's in my writings under the *Notes to a Future Historian*—yes, Evergreen is getting more traditional. But, to a surprising extent, they're our own traditions. And I think that is happening. An example is the language that we are developing about things.

Now, since we're on this topic of the team-taught, interdisciplinary, full-time Programs, instead of departmentally driven specialized courses, let's try to solve this problem of nomenclature. What we started using during that day, and during the rest of the planning, were "theme teams," the teams devoted to studying a theme. And at one point—yeah, you can get a little bit goofy in the late hours of committee discussions—we were thinking of calling them "demes," which is Greek for the city-states, the people, demo—democracy, demagogue. The people. So they would be demes. But then, people said, no, if they'd be under a particular Dean, grouped that way, they'd be Dean's deme teams. [laughter] But it was still the language of theme teams that we kept using.

And when the Planning Faculty Members met in the fall of '70, and got together the programs—ideas for the first programs—we started inviting in what would now be called focus groups—a sampling of high school seniors; a sampling of students enrolled at other schools; a sampling of people who would be thinking of transferring. We met at least a sampling of maybe first-year graduate students. We met at least three or four focus groups. They abhorred the term "theme team," because apparently, some of

them were still familiar with the use of “theme” as a weekly required essay in an English course.

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Teske: And so we figured we had to get rid of it. Now, here we have 18 Planning Faculty Members there, the Provost and three Deans, three Vice Presidents and a President. One of the questions that we had first was our printed materials—brochures and so forth—were not getting through. We needed a new Admissions brochure. We needed something fairly small, fairly short, that would make the points succinctly, and make them in language that would get across to students.

[Sigh.] Here we had all of this brain power, and we weren’t getting it. So the Deans, for the first of—now, I recall our doing this twice, the first of two times, declared a bottle contest; paying out of their own pocket for anybody who could come up with the wording for a succinct brochure that would really strike through to students. The prize of the contest would be up to a reasonable expense—maybe 25 bucks a bottle—a .75 liter—of your favorite hard liquor. That was it, the bottle contest.

The winner was a young man working for the library, who then registered as one our first students, Tim Moffatt. He made sure that the moment that registration opened that he got in there first. And it was Tim, who came through with—we were able to print it out in a sort of 4x6” little pamphlet—with something that, you know, just really hit the target.

Well, if the “theme team” thing didn’t work—and we’re talking now about getting into December, where we really had better make up our minds, because I had the first catalog to edit, and we had to know what we were going to call these things. We went to the bottle contest again. Can you come up with a name for whatever it is we’re doing? And the winner was Richard Jones, with the term “coordinated studies,” which seemed just right.

Up until that time, we had been talking about the planner and leader as a theme team captain. Then we started talking about coordinator, and that’s how it got into our nomenclature. And one of the things I’ve liked, through the years, is that it holds up. It points out that if nothing else, other schools’ curricula are anything but coordinated.

When somebody would be asked, “Why did you take Spanish?”

“I had to take a foreign language.”

You ask a Greener, “Why did you take Spanish?”

“Well, I’m interested in studying . . .”

All the difference in the world—“coordinated.”

And if you want to get really highfalutin about it, Susan, you could say, as I have often said, that the regular system of class bells, where you have to pretend to be a little biologist from 9:00 till 10:00, or

9:00 to 9:50; then the class bell rings and you're on your way to becoming a little historian; and there are all of these shifts. And, of course, as you felt, as I felt, and as many students feel—it's time after supper to start studying. You've got five competing courses. Which do you study for? It's a way that diffuses energy, effort and concentration.