

Ernest “Stone” Thomas
Interviewed by Anthony Zaragoza
The Evergreen State College oral history project
August 28, 2020
FINAL

Zaragoza: Welcome back, Stone. It’s August 28, 2020. We had so much to talk about during your time at Evergreen that we needed to do a second interview. We left off with you kind of bringing us up to the ‘80s, and some of the work you were doing after you left Evergreen. Go ahead and tell us some more about that.

Thomas: Okay. Good to see you again, Brother Anthony, and thank you for the opportunity to continue this dialog. Because of this opportunity you should know I have been really reflecting on the tremendous amount of learning I experienced during my career at The Evergreen State College.

Prior to becoming a dean in '84, Dr. Charles McCann was the Founding President. McCann left and went into the faculty. Former Governor Dan Evans became the second TESC president. Needless to say, there were continued cuts throughout the State, and one of the things that was happening within the State of Washington, particularly on the west side of the State of Washington, was the outsourcing that was occurring at Weyerhaeuser and Boeing. You remember Weyerhaeuser? Boeing?

Zaragoza: Yes, sir.

Thomas: A lot of changes were occurring. Weyerhaeuser was shipping a lot of its processing of lumber to Taiwan. Boeing was outsourcing a lot of work to different states. So, you start seeing some interesting dynamics in terms of the political economy of the State of Washington, particularly on the west side.

Evans’ leadership and administrative style impacted college governance. Budget development and policy decision-making processes became more compartmentalized and top down. This shift created some unhealthy tension within the institution.

Thomas: Evans was appointed in 1977. He served until 1983. Evans left the college after Governor Spellman appointed him to serve the remaining term of the deceased Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson. Evans’ knowledge of legislators and the legislative processes made him an effective external president. However, his leadership style and administrative lens was more geared toward bureaucracy. While processes, like DTFs, etc., were still operative, state funding and external accountability requirements were becoming more intrusive drivers for TESC policy formulation.

It is important to remember what was going in the higher education arena. External

accreditation agencies throughout the United States were beginning to move toward demands for accountability and outcome measures. Evergreen was beginning to experience enrollment declines generating more legislative scrutiny of the cost benefit of the college. These externally driven dynamics impacted the evolution of how the college framed and made policy decisions

For example, when I first came to Evergreen, a lot of organizational dialogue focused on how to best teach students to learn X, Y and Z? However, the scrutiny movement by the state and accreditation intensified, the tone of discussions shifted to how do you document and substantiate student learning? How do you know the narrative evaluation is really measuring student learning outcomes? What impact would a more predictable curriculum have on student enrollment management? The state legislature became intrusive with regards to the student demographics. The powers to be wanting to see more in-state student enrollment.

These external initiatives created new dynamics within Evergreen. Evergreen has not always had 100 percent of its faculty that were interested in the administration or governance of the college. I believe all faculty were committed to the founding college concept, but some faculty struggled with it. You could hear the discussion. "Well, why don't we do hybrid? Why don't we put a letter value on our evaluations?" Those kinds of discussions were emerging. Because the pressure was external the nature of the dialogue was different compared to when I first came to Evergreen.

The dialogue and the attitude when I first got there was, "Hey, we know our students are learning. Hell, we write good evaluations, and not only are they learning, but a lot of our students are going to graduate school, so how they function in the graduate school should reflect on how they have learned here at The Evergreen State College."

At that time, the Northwest Association was putting a lot of pressure on us to substantiate and document student learning outcomes. I started seeing a bit of a change. The fact budget cuts were inevitable the administration started looking at how do we close the gap in terms of funding? During this time, the Office of College Advancement was created. The organization discussion was focused on how to image and market the college for external fund raising.

Then you start seeing discussions about program cuts. What should we eliminate? Because we do not have enough money to do all this, should we change the student-to-faculty ratio because we have less money? Then the whole evolution of adjunct faculty starts to occur because full-time faculty come with benefits. What also started to occur was early discussions about unionization, because when you start talking about cuts, and who will be eliminated? Are you going to reduce faculty contract and bring in an adjunct to cover the rest of the contract? Those kinds of things were going on.

Needless to say [laughing] there was more tension now because the nature of the administration started to get bigger. You had a Vice President for Finance, now you have added another Vice President to go out and hustle money. The tone of the organizational dialogue and college administration started to change. The external pressure was intensifying because state revenues were declining.

Zaragoza: I had a very targeted question about this. You've talked about budget cuts, you've talked about the hierarchizing of decision-making, you've talked about the compartmentalization of the way money was handled, you've talked about the growth of adjunct faculty, the growth in so-called accountability, and external pressures. Stone, what was the impact of all this on students?

Thomas: The immediate impact on students was that you start seeing a rise in tuition, and you start seeing somewhat of a leveling out of financial aid. The impact on students was financial.

The curriculum pretty much stayed fluid, but my experience was you start seeing the curriculum deans trying to be more responsive to the market. You start seeing faculty trying hard to deal with the demands on teaching. I believe at that particular time, we developed a Master's degree in Public Administration.

I think some of this, Brother Anthony, challenged the vitality of the interdisciplinary nature of programs. Faculty started moving toward more group contracts and individual studies which really changed the opportunities for faculty and students to interact with each other. Students came in with a little bit more apprehension about the flexibility of the curriculum. They wanted to know X, Y—if I do this, this, this and this, do I get this, this and this? The nature of the expectations of students was a little bit different.

These dynamics fostered a discussion about curriculum planning. If I remember correctly, Brother Anthony, there was a period when we planned curriculum based on two years, so the student knew what they would be taking the following year. What you started seeing, because the students wanted to have a better sense of the strategic direction of the academic planning, you start seeing the early stages of curriculum Pathways.

Zaragoza: Stone, what year again did you leave Evergreen?

Thomas: I left in '90. I was a dean for six years, and then I left and went to Brookhaven College. In those six years, organizationally speaking, I started reporting to a Vice President for Student Development. I had a dotted line to academics because I administered the academic support programs but I no longer reported to the Provost. I still sat with the deans. By the way, around this time the decision was made to hire professional deans.

Zaragoza: Can you tell us just a little bit more about that? What was the reasoning behind that? What

were the impacts of that? How was that navigated?

Thomas: Some discussion was starting with McCann, but if my memory serves me correctly, it was under Evans that they started looking at professional deans. The rationale was to create continuity in budget functions and curriculum development. If I remember correctly, there were two. John Perkins and Barbara Smith were the two deans. There was a lot of concern about that. At the same time, the compromise was that faculty would still rotate into the deanship at different levels, but the academic administration would be managed by those two professional deans. They still had Provosts, etc.

There was some discussion, but at that point in the evolution of the college, there was less pushback than it would have been five, six years before that. [laughing] A lot of faculty did not want to be dean. Most said "Hey, I came here to teach."

Zaragoza: I can relate. How did that evolve over time? Because that is not the case anymore, so how did that get resolved?

Thomas: The organizational structure was still in place when I left Evergreen. I cannot accurately give you an answer to your question.

Zaragoza: You leave Evergreen, and you started to tell us a little bit last time about what you take with you, the Evergreen in your suitcase. I am curious if you could talk more about that.

Thomas: As a preface, I left Evergreen because I really enjoy the dynamics of working at the community level. When I was up in Washington, I worked a lot with the Tacoma Community College, worked a lot with Seattle Community College. We had partnerships with Seattle Community College because they were doing learning communities, etc.

The dynamic, fluid nature of being responsive to a community with regards to the educational needs was exciting to me. Community colleges are also the access point for a lot of students, particularly students of color. The opportunity to develop a fluid kind of transition from K through 12 to higher education was something I was really interested in. That is why we created Upward Bound. The program provided the opportunity to matriculate students from middle school to higher education.

By the way, I failed to mention, we tried to develop Upward Bound programs in Olympia. However, the town and gown relationship were so tense that the public schools in Olympia did not want to touch us. They said, "Nah, I don't want my students out there with all them hippies and all them people be smoking dope and stuff." I said, "Hey, I saw some of your students smoking dope right down the street." [laughing]

I left on good terms to pursue an opportunity that was of interest and was aligned with my professional interest.

When I went to the Dallas Community College District as a Vice President for Student Development at Brookhaven College, academic administrators and faculty were at the embryonic stage of developing learning communities in the social science disciplines of history, sociology, psychology, etc.

President Patsy Fulton wanted to develop a more comprehensive student development division that was holistic and was oriented to best practices of enrollment management. Translated the student development division would be a one-stop collaborative college unit. For example, when Ernest Thomas expressed an interest in Brookhaven College, Admissions, Financial Aid and Academic Advising would have contact with him to cultivate his matriculation to the college. At Evergreen, I worked in a collaborative environment, so this was a skill that I was able to bring to Brookhaven College. Also, my experience in Enrollment Management laid the foundation for developing a one stop shop approach to building the student enrollment. From Admissions all the way to Student Activities, we developed a seamless approach to helping the student matriculate and be retained in the college.

Brookhaven is in Farmers Branch, a suburb of Dallas. The average age of students in the Dallas County Community College District was 27. At Brookhaven, the average age was 21. The student population was first generation, commuting students who needed integration into an academic environment in order to be retained. We spent a lot of upfront time providing an orientation to first generation on what higher education is and how to socially and academically integrate this student population into the college. To achieve this end, we had to work collaboratively throughout all the college divisions to integrate students into the environment.

The other skillset that I had in my toolkit was cross functional collaboration. There was a gap between academics and student development, primarily because of the non-residential nature of the college. Faculty come, they teach, and they split. They are gone. Faculty participation in governance is restricted to academics.