

THE LIBERAL ARTS AT EVERGREEN*

Sam Schrager

Is Evergreen a liberal arts college? The answer seems to depend on what the words “liberal arts” are taken to mean. If they conjure up images of elite schools or an elevation of humanities over science, the answer will be no. If they stand for a broad education, then it’s yes. Either way the term carries ambiguity, at times tinged with suspicion. Maybe this ambivalence contributed to the recent re-branding of Evergreen, in the catalogue and on the website, from “a distinctive public liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest” to “a distinctive arts and sciences college in the Pacific Northwest.” Whoever made the change didn’t find it consequential enough to ask permission from the faculty.

I see this hedging of bets about the liberal arts as a sign of our uncertainty about what kind of institution Evergreen in fact is and in what direction it should be heading. I will argue that Evergreen is a liberal arts college in its very bones and that its future prospects depend on how skillfully we build on this identity.

When the liberal arts banner is flown, certain attributes are regularly displayed. Here is an enumeration by Thomas Cronin, president of Whitman College:

First... The best liberal arts colleges have dozens of exceptional professors who push their students and engage them one-on-one. Teachers at the best liberal arts colleges also serve as advisers, mentors, coaches, and role models of what it means to be educated.

Second... Learning is viewed as a process of stretching, exploring, and thinking critically rather than as memorization and feeding facts back to professors on quizzes and exams. Liberal arts colleges challenge students to write, to debate, to participate actively in small classes and seminars, to conduct independent research, to examine existing theories, tear them apart, and put them back together again.

Third, a liberal arts college is an ideal place to explore what it means to be a human being, to debate the obligations of citizenship, to learn about democracy and market economics and their alternatives. It also is a splendid place for reading and rereading the classics... for exploring non-Western literature and alternative ideologies and religions, and to learn about Islamic, Buddhist, or African philosophy... [A] student has the opportunity to challenge his or her own perspectives, to question, debate, and defend the values that are so important in our changing and multicultural world.

Fourth, liberal arts colleges encourage breadth rather than specialization... to educate rather than train.¹

Evergreen’s student-faculty ratio is twice that at Whitman. Our students vary a great deal more than theirs in age, social class, and academic preparation. Many more of ours depend on low-wage jobs to stay afloat while in school. Yet despite the lack of perks taken for granted at well-heeled institutions, learning in the spirit Cronin describes thrives here. The closeness between students and faculty, the practice of critical inquiry, the cultivation of responsibility as citizens, the concern with breadth of understanding, the support for developing one’s work and one’s self: these are college-wide

* I thank David Marr and Matt Smith for ongoing dialogue about the college.

¹ Thomas E. Cronin, “The Case for a Liberal Arts Education,”

http://www.whitman.edu/president/cronin/articles/art_libarts.cfm, revised from an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 April 1994.

commitments. Sustaining them, we keep sharp the old saw that Evergreen “offers a private college education at a public price.”

But how can a *public* institution like Evergreen, dependent on the state’s largesse, justify devoting itself to these ends rather than to narrower needs of occupational training? The issue is prefigured in Aristotle’s original brief on behalf of the liberal arts. “The citizen,” Aristotle writes, “should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives.” He observes that there is no agreement among Athenians about the subjects that youth should study, or the means of teaching, or the principles that ought to guide their education—that is, “should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge, be the aim of our training.” Aristotle argues for the teaching of those “liberal arts” that are useful and necessary to make “the body or soul or mind of the freeman...fit for the practice or exercise of virtue.” And he argues for avoidance of “any occupation, art, or science” that degrades or distracts from this purpose.²

The choices in fifth-century Athens echo through the history of American higher education. Who would benefit from studying the liberal arts? What subjects are properly included? How should they be taught? Why pursue this enterprise in a practicality-driven society? The sheer fact of Evergreen’s existence in the service of a heterogeneous student body represents a staunchly democratic response by Washington State to these questions: a conviction about the potential value of liberal arts learning for the population at large, and a wager on the college’s capacity to devise innovative ways to make such an education worthwhile.

This view was, indeed, very close to the understanding of Evergreen’s mission that Charles McCann articulated in 1968-9, before the planning faculty convened.³ During the planning year and after, the ideas of John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn—both steeped in liberal arts thinking—were highly influential. Yet in the ethos that developed, Evergreen came to believe that its own structural innovations rather than liberal arts principles were the root of its commitment to critical thinking, active citizenship, the student as a person. We fell into a habit of conflating the liberal arts with practices in colleges and universities that we were anxious to distinguish ourselves from.

Evergreen was invented to counter the fragmentation of education in the twentieth century that accompanied the institutionalization and proliferation of departments, specializations, electives, research programs, and laboratory training—trends that accelerated at mid-century with the expansion of universities, fueled by government and foundation funding and by large increases in the ranks of degree-seeking high-school graduates. *Not fragmentation, but integration; not competition, but collaboration; not specialization, but openness and multiplicity; not divorce of knowledge from moral concerns, but their reunion.* In the pride we justly take in these principles, it can be easy to forget that they were—and are—not the exclusive province of a small band of maverick institutions and faculty. They are impulses widely felt in places where the liberal arts is prized, because the splits they seek to overcome are endemic, troubling characteristics of higher education and modern society.

Liberal arts practices are tied to the historical moment. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, moral concerns were central to the developing disciplines of economics, political science, sociology, psychology, and biology. During this period, public activism on behalf of social reform and practical applications of new ideas were regarded as key aspects of teaching and research.⁴ (Hull House

² Aristotle, *Politics & Poetics*, tr. B. Jowett and T. Twining (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 207-8. The quotes are from *Politics*, Book 8, I-II.

³ For statements by Charles McCann, see John McCann, *General Education at Evergreen: The Historical Context, Current Experiments, and Recommendations for Implementation* (Olympia: The Evergreen State College, 2002), 3-4.

⁴ On this point, and on the larger trend toward the separation of knowledge from morality between 1870 and 1930, see Julie E. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

and Tuskegee Institute are well-known examples.) Similarly, Cronin's statement is a snapshot of the thinking of many educators circa 1994, when the need for multicultural perspectives had become widely recognized, but the desirability of interdisciplinary study and community service still lay, for many, somewhere over the horizon. Not any longer. For instance, Grinnell College, the best-endowed liberal arts college in the U.S., is now launching a major initiative for students to undertake "inquiry-based learning" through "courses that explore a subject from a number of different disciplinary perspectives." The aim is to incorporate "emerging areas of knowledge and human understanding beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries." And this fall, the University of Washington at Tacoma will organize its first freshman class into year-long interdisciplinary courses on a single "global theme," taught by pairs of faculty from liberal arts fields rotating in for a quarter. UWT focuses mainly on business, nursing, education, and other career training, but through interdisciplinary study it intends to give students a liberal arts experience.

As in any vital tradition, liberal arts practices are sustained and elaborated by generations of practitioners. They are also debated and contested, remodeled and re-imagined, in light of institutional and societal pressures. Evergreen originated in, and has made challenging contributions to, this tradition. Why would we be ambivalent about this identity? What, exactly, would we trade our birthright *for*?

My sense of Evergreen's regard for the liberal arts got a jolt during the enrollment growth debate last year. Along with many others, I was quite skeptical about the market-driven rationales for hiring endorsed by administrators and the DTF. The reason for my dismay was this: teaching in the humanities and interpretive social sciences in the Olympia daytime curriculum has plummeted over the past dozen years. Anthropology, English, writing, history, art history, and religion are fields that I know to be in decline. Sociology, philosophy, and classics also seem too sparsely represented—and no doubt there are deficiencies elsewhere in the curriculum apparent to other faculty, from where they sit. Why are there these holes? Evergreen has made no institutional commitment to enable students to study the range of subjects that are widely recognized as constituent parts of a liberal education. Indeed, this primary liberal arts tenet regarding a broad, balanced curriculum has been virtually ignored in our public discourse.

Since this problem came to a head for me with the priorities set for enrollment growth, I've been trying to gauge administrators' reservations about the liberal arts. Here are two that I've heard, and my reactions:

"Evergreen has tapped out the market for students interested in the liberal arts. That's why enrollment growth has to be in new areas, rather than in more of what we're already doing."

No good evidence has been offered for this claim, yet it's been asserted as fact and used as a primary rationale for faculty growth policy. Enrollment patterns in Washington's four-year institutions suggest, to the contrary, a large untapped market for liberal arts education. According to the HEC Board's 2003-4 breakdown, 73% of undergraduates (66,429 students) are concentrating in areas clearly available at Evergreen (arts and letters, sciences, social sciences, education, computer science).

Why would students come here rather than, say, the University of Washington or Western Washington University? One compelling reason is the personal scale, with connectedness to faculty and classmates, compared to the prevalence of super-sized classes at those institutions. Nearly every 300- and 400-level English literature class at UW has a cap of forty, and waitlists for creative writing are so long that few can get into an introductory course until their junior year. In sociology at UW, nearly all 300-level classes cap at forty-five or fifty, or are split into sections with T.A.s. Biology at the 300-level is mostly taught in sections. Even the Honors College pegs most course limits to thirty-five. At Western, upper-division classes are generally smaller than their UW counterparts, but not by much, and the vast majority of 100- and 200-level classes are large lectures, just as at UW.

“It’s hard to sell students and their parents on the value of a liberal arts education. The term often means nothing to them.”

Is our recruiters’ problem explaining the liberal arts or explaining Evergreen? Not long ago, when my two older children were going through the many steps of divining where to attend college, I occasionally asked them and their friends about what attracted them to various schools. I knew that with their get-out-of-Dodge mentality, Evergreen was a long shot. Still, it surprised me that interdisciplinary study didn’t seem to be a blip on anybody’s screen. Most of them were thinking, rather, about a *discipline* or two—in the loosest sorts of ways, to be sure, as a subject they *might* want to pursue, an answer to stave off nosy, well-meaning adults, and a starting point for comparing colleges. If a college offered field X (or X and Y), it was much more likely to get further consideration. Scanning Evergreen’s website or catalogue with particular fields in mind was, I heard, disconcerting and off-putting.

Surveys of new students confirm both that the college’s overwhelming draw is for liberal arts and also that most expect to pursue one or two particular areas of study. Among first-year in-state students who enrolled in Fall 2005, 80.1% said that “ability to study in a specific field or discipline of your choice” was either very influential or influential in their decision to come. For those accepted who don’t come, the leading academic reason is inability to locate—or find depth in—specific fields. As for those prospective students out there who never reach the threshold of applying, it’s unlikely that disinterest in the liberal arts stops many. Doubts about what Evergreen offers, I think, pose much greater barriers.

The best diagnosis I’ve seen of the origins of our academic troubles I found just recently, while reading David Marr’s five-year review file. David contends that, right from the college’s start, there emerged an “official and semiofficial discourse about pedagogy” that was “predicated on a false separation between considerations of what to teach and considerations of how to teach.”

First, the distinction between what to teach and how to teach was made rigid, even reified. Second, how to teach was valorized to the point that the question of what to teach (and why) was *driven under ground*—i.e., put outside public discourse of academic policy. Evergreen accordingly took on not an *academic identity*, but an identity defined through a “set of pedagogical values or principles”...⁵

A wide gap has always existed, David writes, between this public rhetoric and the actual experiences of Evergreen faculty and students, for whom *what* is taught and learned matters a great deal. David notes that it would be equally mistaken to valorize the what at the expense of the how: content and process are, in fact, inseparable.

It’s easy enough to see how this gap happened: why the amazing chance to create a college from scratch led to intoxication with design; why how-to issues about pedagogy within this new design became coin of the realm for public discourse; and why such matters of process became institutionalized as “the Evergreen way”—in other words, the college’s sense of its unique identity. It’s much harder, I think, for us—we who have been socialized into this culture—to grasp the collateral damage caused by eliminating “the question of the what to teach (and why)” from public discourse. David says the result was the loss of “an academic identity.”

What might an academic identity for Evergreen have looked like? The question led me to a statement David Marr and Rudy Martin co-authored in 1975 that I had read once before, but without really comprehending it.

⁵ David Marr’s comments to David Marshall, then director of Evergreen’s Office of Institutional Research, dated 15 April 2004.

Evergreen should assert and defend the position that knowledge, now radically fragmented, should be reunified. The principle of specialization inherent in fragmented knowledge at its best gives a distorted view of the human condition; at its worst it coincides with the modern split between fact and value, yielding the monstrosity of “value-free” inquiry. Accepting this faulty premise leads one to seek knowledge via the conventional academic disciplines of history, psychology, biology, art, etc., studied in isolation from one another, and results in the disciplines becoming concerned primarily with themselves rather than with the nature of human experience.⁶

This point is crucial, for it captures the opportunity Evergreen had created for itself to participate in the reconstruction of modern knowledge. The college was *designed* in reaction to academic ruptures and contradictions. Commonsense dictated that the design should be *used* for education that addressed, bridged, and transcended these divisions. How and what to teach would then be wedded. Evergreen was positioned to take “the first step toward developing a holistic view of knowledge.” This shared project, made possible—but not at all assured—by the new, innovative structure, could become the college’s distinctive contribution to American education.

Today, as the college once again ponders its future, this insight still provides, to my mind, the one compelling basis we have for an academic identity. Such a common enterprise would include these four features:

The reintegration of knowledge. The great majority of Evergreen faculty, I think, recognize themselves as participating in a project of reconstituting knowledge. It is probably a (if not *the*) primary reason that most of us choose to be here, at a college which lays stress squarely on connected and inquiry-based learning. The passionate concerns of teachers and students with sustainability, social justice, artistic expression, lived experience, scientific inquiry, multicultural perspectives, bodily wisdom, historical understanding, and the like: all, in significant part, are responses to blinkered thinking and narrow training; all are engagements with the challenges of finding and developing one’s work. As the nub for a definition of common purpose, the renewal of knowledge has the great virtue of inclusiveness. It speaks to the wide-ranging interests in the human condition and the natural world that animate learning at Evergreen.

Liberal arts fields. In order to have a shared academic purpose, the college must also take an inclusive view of the liberal arts. No discipline or set of subjects can claim special privilege in relation to the rest. Each needs to be present because it holds important kinds of knowledge; each is constrained by partial understandings and conventionalized boundaries. David and Rudy point to “the paradox that the better one knows a single discipline, the better one knows its limitations, and therefore the more one appreciates the necessity of knowing other disciplines.” The liberal arts must be adequately represented across-the-board for students to get genuine breadth and to freely choose what they wish to study. Rather than downplay the significance of fields, the curriculum should make clear that interdisciplinary inquiry is anchored in field-based knowledge and understandings.

Interdisciplinary exploration. For all the invocation of the word “interdisciplinary” as the essence of our institutional identity, what does it mean? After thirty-five years, we still lack a vocabulary to make basic distinctions among varieties of interdisciplinary teaching and learning. This is a bitter consequence of splitting the how off from the what: the college possesses a public rhetoric about interdisciplinary values and methods, but not a public discourse about the actual studies we undertake. To develop an academic identity, we need to explore what occurs when faculty teach together in the intertidal zones of programs. What do students and faculty learn as they engage the questions, texts, phenomena, ideas, and projects they find there? With a shift of attention to this mostly uncharted terrain,

⁶ David Marr and Rudy Martin, “M & M II: The Current Crisis,” excerpt reprinted in McCann, 73.

Evergreen could become much more substantively involved in issues about the nature of interdisciplinary knowledge in higher education. Among these are issues regarding the nature of open questions, scholarly research, community involvement, and artistic work.

A deliberative body. These are words Rita Pougiales used, at her recent Deans Group meeting, to describe what the faculty should aspire to be. The question of the day is: Whither Evergreen? We have the opportunity, Rita said, to speak plainly with one another about “decisions, values, priority, and preference.” The challenge for us in such deliberations is to take responsibility for the college as a moral institution. To do so requires careful attention, I think, to what Philip Selznick calls the institution’s “spirit”—that is, “the full meaning of the ideal.” “To be sure,” Selznick writes, “institutional values are always at risk, always subject to displacement, attenuation, and corruption. But some ideals are especially vulnerable. The more complex and subtle the value, the more readily it is reduced to an impoverished form.”⁷ To nurture the spirit of education at Evergreen, we must figure out how to defend “the full meaning of the ideal” while—and *by*—being responsive to multiple needs of the public that the college serves. And we should be willing, as an outcome of these deliberations, to set aside certain personal preferences for the sake of what’s desirable for the college.

The Deans Group meetings this winter and spring, conceived by the Agenda Committee and Provost Don Bantz as “a DTF of the whole,” created a promising context for the faculty to begin acting as a deliberative body. Many fresh ideas emerged. I found myself drawn to what Laurie Meeker calls a “hybrid model” of curricular design, which envisions two overlapping, complementary modes of organization: one based on fields of study, the other on interdivisional planning groups. I wrote up the fields-of-study idea, proposing that faculty across the college identify the main academic field(s) we take responsibility for in teaching (see Appendix). The interdivisional planning group idea proposes that faculty coalesce around themes of shared interest. Affiliated faculty would create programs and participate in ongoing collaborations on such topics as global citizenship, place and culture, computing and the arts, sustainability, and somatic studies. Such a structure would enable us to engage more fully in interdisciplinary issues and debates of wide public significance.

However we decide to recast the curriculum, a different approach to hiring is needed—one devoted, as is often said, to “hiring for the college.” Lacking an institutional mandate for sustaining the liberal arts, the Hiring Priorities DTF has no sound way to decide how many faculty might be needed in a given field, or even whether fields highly valued elsewhere belong here at all. Members of the DTF, acting with the best of intentions, compete to achieve the desires of their planning units, which are, for the most part, coalitions of interest groups, each seeking to grow (or at worst not shrink). Since planning units are pitted against each other, the larger the span of liberal arts fields for which a unit is responsible the less able it is to defend these fields. The disparities are compounded over time. Through its prioritizing procedures, then, Evergreen has been reproducing the very fragmentation of knowledge it was originally designed to combat. A reconceived Hiring Priorities DTF, made up of faculty from the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, would be guided by the recognition that all parts of the curriculum are interrelated. When each is healthy, the college is whole.

Unlike most institutions, at Evergreen the faculty has a high degree of freedom to redesign academic structures in order to deal with chronic problems—assuming we can reach agreements about what the problems are. Both the flexibility to change and the clarity about what is at stake for the college are crucial to our chances of thriving over the long haul.

June 2006

⁷ Philip Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 333.

APPENDIX

Fields of Study at Evergreen A proposal for the Deans Groups Sam Schrager

The proposal: Make the fields of study taught at Evergreen more visible across the curriculum. Faculty would confer occasionally with their colleagues in the primary academic field(s) for which they take responsibility, to discuss what they are teaching. The fields would also be represented on the college's website, with a list of the faculty and programs associated with each, along with other useful information. Taking these steps would make the curriculum more intelligible (1) to our students, in planning their studies; (2) to prospective students, many of whom have difficulty seeing how to pursue their interests at Evergreen; and (3) to the faculty, strengthening the college's ability to offer a broad and balanced liberal arts education.

Field-based faculty groups: In some fields (chemistry and visual arts, for instance), faculty already meet as a group to discuss curriculum, resources, and so forth. In others (like English literature and economics), they do not. This proposal would make some degree of coordination a practice for all fields of study at the college. For a subject to be regarded as a "field of study," students must be able to study it at different points in their education. Each faculty group would decide for itself how to provide these opportunities. (Faculty can do so without affecting the flexibility we now have to decide what and with whom to teach.) This approach would highlight the interdependence between fields and interdisciplinary studies at Evergreen. It would show that interdisciplinary learning is anchored in field-based knowledge and thinking which faculty bring to programs, teams and inquiries.

Fields of study on T.E.S.C. website: Each field would set up a webpage noting associated faculty, programs in which the field is featured in the next two years, some potential pathways for students who want to make the field central to their education, related areas of interest, and special resources at the college. (A common template could be designed in a summer institute.) This information would provide a good means for Evergreen students to identify promising programs, faculty, and avenues of study. It would also be a boon for recruitment. Survey data shows that inability to locate—or find depth in—particular fields of interest is the leading academic reason admitted students decide not to attend T.E.S.C. Likewise, this data suggests that "ability to study in a specific field or discipline of your choice" is a very influential (or influential) consideration for most who choose to attend.

Strengthening liberal arts education: By mapping the fields of study faculty are committed to teaching, this plan would give the faculty, as a body, needed perspective on the curriculum as a whole. At present we tend not to know much about the status of fields outside of our own orbits. One untoward consequence is that fields recognized nationally as vital to liberal arts education can be overlooked, even abandoned. (Such has been the fate, for example, of anthropology, which has dwindled from seven full-time faculty to one over the last dozen years.) In the absence of academic departments, Evergreen faculty have the collective responsibility—it is a public trust, really—to develop a curriculum that enables students to get a well rounded, wide ranging education. We should develop hiring priorities with due regard for normative distributions of fields at peer liberal arts institutions. To hire *for the college*, we need a clear sense of who is teaching what, together with careful, ongoing consideration of what fields need to be taught and how many faculty are needed to teach each of them.

A likely objection: "This sounds like a proposal for departments and majors." It isn't. It's a call to clarify the link between fields of study and our interdisciplinary curriculum. Clarity would benefit both—and solidify Evergreen's position as Washington's public liberal arts college.