

## **2/5/08 Student Focus Group on the Evergreen Curriculum**

### **Strengths of the Evergreen Curriculum**

Going back for a second degree, I was picturing having to go through a whole laundry list, cause I had a graphic design degree and I'm going into environmental studies so I'd have to take all this Science 101, 102, and so that's the reason I chose this school.

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You know, I just wanted to open my arms now and just take whatever I can get. If they're offering a website, I'm taking it, and I get every single e-mail at home.... If they're offering me to put my name in a crowd of Native American students that are enrolled at Evergreen, I'm doing it, give me the information you want. If they're offering KEY Students, I'm going there. If they're offering...I mean anything.... Everything that all the students have to offer and that all the groups have to offer, everything that all the professors have to offer. Coming from a place where I was at, which was really really low, to where I am now, I am in complete gratitude. I sit in a space of gratitude like, "You know what, you have two professors, wow! You have three, well I'm sorry, it's a little confusing to understand them? OK, that's all good, you know, takes all kind to make a world ... you got three professors! Oh my god!" I mean, that's huge! Just to get a teacher, we don't get a teacher where I come from.

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[on Student Run Programs] It's the most personal program I've ever known because I had to figure out what I wanted, not what my parents wanted of me, not what society wanted of me, but what do I really want? What am I not afraid of doing? What can I go do? I can do anything, OK, great, now let's bring it together. And Evergreen has offered all of this.

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I think writing your own evaluations is probably my favorite part about Evergreen. I think it's amazing. I think it helps you because at another school, I know when I would be at community college, I never sat and thought, "What did I learn this quarter," I was just like, "I'm gonna wait for my A to come." ... I think it really makes you think about what you learn, and then it makes me start to connect, "Oh I'm connecting protected areas with water now." It makes me start to think about my past evals and how all my school is connected to itself instead of just, "OK, I got a 3.7 this quarter and then I got a 2.2 this quarter" and it's just these classes that don't mean anything. I think its really important for Evergreen, and I was really sad when two years ago they said that you don't have to write your own eval, I think that's falling out of step with what Evergreen stands for.

### **Challenges of the Evergreen Curriculum**

There doesn't seem to be a built in structure for team taught programs. I guess how relationships are fostered seems kind of fuzzy, almost relying on personal connections.... I was in a program last year where it was kind of a two year program that they had planned, and they had taught independently for about half a year. Then they were supposed to make it this year, then their personal relationship pretty much fizzled out. They had planned this four years ago and they were coming from totally different fields,

as far away as you can get, and then the way that they taught, or the way that they even thought about the context of the material, clashed. It just kind of exploded. Their personal relationship started it, and they met at a party, and they had talked about it.... So they met in a social scene, talked about the program, were excited, four years later they don't like each other. And it was apparent to a lot of people in the program.

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I'm not even certain my two instructors talk all that much. And I can tell after the first quarter that they must have gotten some reviews back that they have to kind of interlink more, so they're kind of trying.... I was very surprised by that because I was expecting maybe more ... interweaving. And it still seems very separate. I think the other thing that I would say too is that when I was trying to approach this college, I didn't realize that ... each program, it may never happen again.... And I think people need to be warned that if you see something, don't get too emotionally attached to it or if you are able to take it you'd better.

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Student 1: I wanted to pursue a BS, in addition to a BA, but it's hard to get upper level, upper division credits in that because there aren't that many classes that offer that. And if they do offer that they may not say it really blatantly, you really have to push to get that work done. Which is fine, it's good to be self-motivated, but ...

Student 2: I think that Evergreen can meet those requirements, but you really have to be motivated to take additional evening classes perhaps, or maybe even set up a quarter where you simply just take evening classes to fill out those requirements.

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I feel like, as a freshman, you kind of have to get lucky with what class you get in, because my class, the first one I signed up for, wasn't that good and it wasn't really interdisciplinary and then the second one I signed up for was sort of the same. But a lot of my friends have really great classes that just weren't my thing or I didn't get in.

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I think one of the biggest problems here is that communication between classes and communication at Evergreen seems like it's not really existent. The CPJ isn't really an essential communication message board for all the cool things that students are doing and that people are interested in, activities, so people seem to dissipate into ... whatever they're doing, and there's no communication done. You can't resource yourself out, you can't drop into other things. Even going to lectures, like guest lectures in other programs, people have great faculty, visiting people, and you have no idea what's going on unless you have friends involved. So people aren't connected on campus.

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Student 1: I kind of have a question about credits and loss of credits. I never lost credit but some people lose credit and they think it's kind of great, it's like Evergreen grades. I was in a program last quarter where ... some people definitely were not keeping the expectations of the covenant of the program, but the teacher refused to drop credit because he said he refused to drop credits because that's like grading.... It doesn't seem like there's any consistency.

Student 2: Yeah, I've heard a lot of bad things about consistency. Some classes, it's if you don't do one assignment then you get zero credits automatically. Or some teacher

dropped two credits off of everyone in the class, and some teachers use it as grading, some don't.

Student 1: I've never had a clear answer about what credit is, dropping credit. It's just kind of like this threat of an almost-grade looming over your head.

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I would like to do an independent learning contract and I'm not quite sure how.... In my position with the support I feel I have, I kind of don't know how to start.

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Student 1: The only problem I have ... You know, if you bring your friend right from wherever, kind of reluctant to go to school, and I think that Evergreen's great that it's very easy to get into the school, but then it kind of creates a disparity between students in your program, an all-level program. And then you're in groups with people who don't really even want to be there. And then you're like, "Who the hell do I go to school with? What are they doing here?"

Student 2: That's why individual learning contracts are the best. That's why they shouldn't remove the individual learning contracts.

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Student 1: Last quarter we got a bunch of students who didn't seem like they were interested, so that was difficult.... Kids were gonna drop out last quarter. A bunch of kids had just gotten out of high school and just gotten into college. They were ready to quit. They were looking for peers.

Student 2: We have the highest dropout ratio in Washington state schools, I think.... It's true, I guess, that if you accept a lot of students, that maybe they aren't really ready for school. But ... I know a lot of people who came to Evergreen and couldn't handle or didn't fit in this learning system and they transferred to UW.

### **Strengths/Challenges of the Evergreen Curriculum**

Evergreen was good for me because I didn't know what I wanted to do four years ago, so I was fine kind of bopping to each different kind of class and doing whatever and being happy, but now that I know what I want to do and I've talked to people who are more career-driven or path directed, they say that they can't meet the requirements of either graduate school or even professional requirements. I talk to a lot of teachers who say that there ... isn't anything that's kind of set that you [can] count on, as a school.... You can only take two years of a language, studies don't go far enough, and they don't go in depth enough and there's advanced studies in the sciences but [it's] more limited if you want to do upper division in Culture Text and Language. It's also good because you're studying with the breadth of students, but I'm a little nervous about graduating and how much my credentials mean to other people cause I'm not doing all level programs or getting a degree in something.

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Student 1: Do you guys feel like it's the luck of the draw? That there's nothing standard? That's what I like about Evergreen, you have to know what you're doing, in order to navigate this school and what will work for you.

Student 2: Yeah, that gives me power in my own life. I feel empowered.

Student 3: I feel like I've got the luck of the draw.... I'm enjoying my class and I like both of my professors, [but] it's just not what I was expecting, and I feel like I hear that other people have entirely different experiences.

### **Advising / Resources**

Student 1: I feel like I've gone in to academic advising, and I've gone in and talked to those people and I'm not trying to sound negative but I feel like any advice I've gotten has not been from Evergreen. I feel like I've gone and talked to lawyers and economists and people and they've given me advice, but I feel like I've gone into the advising center and had them just say, "Well, you could do this, or, you know..." and I've had to have a really specific question about this graduate school or my resume or something. I feel like it's always really vague, I have not gotten anything really solid out of them. And I've gone into those offices and talked to them.

Student 2: I seminar with my professors, three of them, we sit around on Saturday and I just tell them my story, they say, "That's what this is" or "That's what psychology is, that's what sociology is," and I go, "really! Yeah!" and then I go read about it and learn about it and I could connect my personal experience with the books and realize that that is something that I wanna do.

Student 3: Yeah, I tried to talk to my professors and it didn't seem like it went anywhere.... I would love to go to my professors because one of my theories of going to school is that you make the connections and from the connections then you can make your way out in the world. So without those connections it's like I could probably ... do this on my own. I would love to go to my professors, but it doesn't seem to work out.

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I haven't really utilized any of the offices. I went to Academic Advising when I was a sophomore, and at that point I think I was just so happy taking random classes and I saw no correlation or future for myself besides being a permanent BA student. I think maybe I didn't ever want to leave school but I just felt like I was wasting my parents' money. And I came here right out of high school and I was like, "I just want to do this, do this, and then graduate." So I don't know how I've actually found a path, but I think it's been through a liberal arts education where I've taken all sorts of things, but I found my own interest and now I'm graduating and I can't believe that I have a direction. I can't believe that I want to be an architect, and that I know it, and I'm graduating knowing exactly what I want to do, and in the last year, that's when I found it. It's been perfect that I found the faculty, and everyone's been really supportive, and offered classes, and I know everything that I need to do, and I'm still encouraged to pursue my other interests.... And I've just been accepted to be a presenter at a conference. So it's really interdisciplinary and I know exactly what I want to do. So it's been really supportive but I've never reached out and I don't feel like it's necessary if you've been the kind of student Evergreen probably attracts, and that's an individual learner who wants to figure things out for themselves.

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Student 1: As far as personal engagement, I think that a lot of people who come to Evergreen sort of lack that at this point in their life, or they don't know what to do with it.

So that might be a major problem, and academic advising should be a little more helpful with those people. Because a lot of my friends are dropping out.

Student 2: I advise other students. There's one woman in my class, ... she was tanking the biology, and I [said], "Go to Quasar." She said, "What's that?" And I told my instructor, "You should tell these guys about the writing center and Quasar because I found out about them on accident and they're really helpful." And he [said], "No, I'm not going to do that today" and just blew it off. So I stood in class and said, ... "Hey guys, by the way ..."

Student 3: I think Core programs do a very good job of introducing it, or at least my program did. I think the first two weeks or three weeks of class was just getting adjusted to college life. We had a whole bunch of workshops about "These are the resources available to you" and my faculty did a very good job of pointing them out and introducing guest speakers and having them come in.

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Student 1: I came here right out of high school ... and I never took a Core program, but I feel like I don't really want [research workshops]. I feel like you're in college, you should kind of know how to do research. I don't really like it when faculty spend all this time saying "Let's go to the library." I've had it be in a junior/senior class where they're like, "We're gonna go to the library." I just feel to me like that's kind of patronizing, and it's like you should either know how to do research and be in the library or you shouldn't be a senior in college.

Student 2: But there are some people who don't know anything about the library. Because actually my class really helped me when they said it was library day because ... I was the one that needed to go to the library.

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[**Interdisciplinary learning**]... I'm taking three night classes so they don't collaborate with each other strictly, they're not supposed to, but I see a lot of connections between them.... I make my own connections between the things I learn in ASL and in East-West Psychology, so whether it's intentional or not, it's there.

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I think **linking theory with practical education** is really strong. It's kind of my hobby to go to other people's schools wherever I travel ... and I always feel like it seems so much more detached.... I feel like I always in every class at Evergreen just came to so much more. Maybe because it's sixteen credits at once, I feel like I really get what I'm learning at Evergreen. Like with the case studies, it's always case studies and it always makes me realize how complicated things are. Just doing group projects and personal projects, it's something that's 100% better than so many other schools.

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Student 1: I think that we do a fairly good job at **collaborative learning**. I've noticed, discussing with other students at other universities, other universities have a far more competitive atmosphere where each student is individually competing with every other individual student in the class for that grade because it's on a curve and there's going to be someone who will be at the top. I feel that Evergreen does a far better job of having

everyone work together towards a common goal in [a] program, but that just may be my personal experience.

Student 2: I feel like Evergreen is kind of set up more like its expected you're going to act in teams in a workplace, compared to a workplace where it's set up like you're trying to compete to ... get your promotion or something. And I really like that.

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Student 1: I think **personal engagement** makes my education, because I can take a regular program with everyone else and it's whatever I do with it that I end up doing, and I end up being able to think about and talk about my experience. So if I was not engaged, I wouldn't have an education.... Your education is what you do. And that's how you find your direction in the school, I think. By personal engagement.

Student 2: Yeah, and I kind of see a link to self-evaluations with that. Last quarter, I'm sure my self-evaluation, as far as what I think I learned or gained, skills I gained, was very different from each and every other person's, and I like that I'm able to distinguish myself ... and make the class for me what it needs to be.

Student 3: I was reading personal engagement in a different way.... If I'm hearing right, personal engagement was more that you personally were making an effort to engage.... Because I was thinking [of] personal engagement as far as people within the faculty and the school engaging with me. You know, kind of a different flip on it. And I was thinking that's probably last place [among the foci] for me, because I feel like I'm not getting a lot of personal [engagement]. I kind of try to go different places and I feel like I'm getting kind of a standard answer. ... I do think it's key here to be personally motivated. I think of coming here right out of high school, and trying to find my way. That would have been hard, to really be self-directed like that.

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Student 1: **[Learning across differences]** I really have embraced taking night and weekend classes because there's another difference, ... age and experience. [It] was really interesting for me to be able to talk to people that are going through the Previous Learning Experience program, and so they're older than me, they have different experiences, they're coming back to college or something, and that's a really great way to learn for me.

Student 2: That was stressed here to me when I came here, because I applied when I was 38, and I was very encouraged, "No that's great, you can bring your experience."