

From: Grissom, Tom
Sent: Thursday, July 05, 2007 6:09 PM
To: All Faculty; Academic Staff DL
Subject: Comments on the Humanities at Evergreen

Below (and attached) is the text of my brief comments at the Emeritus Faculty Ceremony during the Board of Trustees Meeting on June 13. I want to thank the Board of Trustees for the opportunity to speak; but my comments, of course, were directed to the faculty and the college as a whole, and as such I have decided to distribute them more widely in this way. I have resisted the impulse to add to anything I said at the time: such as why even in this day and age the humanities still are, and should continue to be, central to the concept of a liberal education; why no liberal arts college that aspires to excellence should allow the humanities to be as disregarded as they are fast becoming at Evergreen; why our Planning Groups have become little more than de facto Departments, and why SI and ES are the most departmentalized of all, and why no one should be surprised by that; why the ruling by the Provost and the Deans years ago that faculty could be members of only a single Planning Group, rather than being allowed to join more than one, was a mistake that has isolated the Planning Groups and made them impediments to interdisciplinary approaches to the curriculum and to hiring interdisciplinary faculty; why our constant concern about career pathways and disciplinary coverage in the curriculum, particularly in the sciences, unnecessarily creates much larger problems than any it addresses; why our current fixation on expansion and growth for the sake of growth will only exacerbate all of the above concerns, and why Evergreen should never try to be all things to all students; why a troubling symptom of what is happening at Evergreen is the increased autonomy and isolation of the Administration from the faculty and curricular programs and the day to day teaching and learning that goes on at the college; these and other points related to the problem of what is happening to the humanities will, I think, be apparent to those who have been at Evergreen during this period of time.

The Humanities at Evergreen
Comments by Tom Grissom
During Emeritus Faculty Ceremony
Meeting of the Board of Trustees
June 13, 2007

It would be easy enough to recount any number of personally rewarding and memorable experiences of teaching and learning at Evergreen. I have an ample store of such anecdotes, as do my colleagues, and last evening we enjoyed sharing some of them.

Instead, I wish to use this opportunity to tell you about a concern I have as I leave Evergreen. I am concerned about what I see as the gradual erosion of the humanities in the Evergreen curriculum.

I came to Evergreen from a career at one of the National Laboratories in New Mexico, a laboratory whose principal purpose is the design and development of nuclear weapons, which also became my primary responsibility there. I left the National Labs over issues of conscience. It had come to seem to me that one of the major problems confronting us was the very narrow perspective, the increasingly narrow context, in which I and others like me had been trained to view the world and to approach problems. I was fairly well trained as a physicist, but even with my PhD I was woefully uneducated by any measure.

I came to Evergreen because I wanted to be able to teach and learn not in the narrow context of specialization or a particular academic discipline but in the very broadest context of the entire human condition, in all of its dimensions and complexities. I could do that best, I thought at the time and still believe, at an interdisciplinary liberal arts college, at Evergreen. For me then and for me now twenty-two years later, *that larger context of a broad concern for the human condition is the one set by the humanities*. The humanities are, and should be I think, the heart and the soul of the Evergreen curriculum. All of our teaching and learning should be done in that larger human perspective of which the great works and documents of the humanities are the enduring record.

During the last decade, the second half of my tenure at Evergreen, I and others have noticed and commented about a slow, gradual, but steady erosion of the place of the humanities represented by the faculty and the curriculum at Evergreen. This erosion has been partly the result of the inevitable loss of particular individuals and the disciplines they represented, as well as the influence they had among the faculty at large. Individuals such as Charles McCann, Charles Teske, Rudy Martin, Pete Sinclair, Leo Daugherty, Richard Alexander, David Powell, Tom Rainey, Gil Salcedo, Michael Pfeifer, Nancy Allen, Nancy Taylor, Thad Curtz, Beryl Crowe, York Wong, Sandra Simon, Betty Ruth Estes, Virginia Darney, Peta Henderson, Marilyn Frasca, Sandie Nisbet, Will

Humphreys, Mark Levensky, Alan Nasser, David Paulson, Don Finkel, Craig Carlson, Gordon Beck, Art Mulka, Helen Cullyer, Hiro Kawasaki, soon David Marr, eventually David Hitchens; the list goes on and on, and it is not meant to be exhaustive. Everyone has his or her own list of those who have made valuable contributions to teaching the humanities at Evergreen, and in each case the list is long and meritorious by any standard.

By turning to the back of the 2007-2008 Evergreen catalog and perusing the credentials of the faculty one sees that we have in fact become much thinner in the humanities. I say that intending in no way to disparage the quality or excellence of the faculty at large. I am not talking about individuals but about an overall trend.

The erosion of the humanities at Evergreen is only partly due to the loss of individual faculty. Equally or more disturbing is what I perceive as a diminished interest in and concern for the humanities and their central role in the curriculum by the faculty in general. Addressing this trend will require the concerted attention and efforts of all of the planning groups, not merely those faculty in the Culture, Text and Language planning group directly representing the humanities. In fact, our current compartmentalized structure for planning the curriculum, as well as for hiring faculty, is partly if not largely responsible, in my view, for the gradual erosion of the humanities at Evergreen.

I have on occasion, I know, irritated some of my faculty colleagues by pointing out that you can solve as many environmental problems teaching the Classics as you can by teaching Environmental Studies. And in place of “environmental problems” you can substitute any other set of concerns you may have growing out of the human condition. That conviction is what brought me to Evergreen. I have seen nothing in my twenty-two years of teaching and learning here to persuade me otherwise. I did not come here to train physicists. I came to teach students, and myself, to think more broadly about the questions we face as human beings trying to create and live in a just and sustainable society. For me then, and for me still, the proper context for doing that is the one created by the strong central role of the humanities in the Evergreen curriculum.

If Evergreen has a sustainable uniqueness, it is to continue to create a learning environment which promotes broad interdisciplinary approaches to problems in place of the narrow specialization that too often leads to us to become lost in the details and miss seeing the forest for the trees. We can comfortably leave narrowly-focused disciplinary specialization to the research universities. And in any kind of sustainable interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning about the human condition, *the humanities must play a central role.*