

2/7/08 Student Focus Group on the Evergreen Curriculum

Strengths of the Evergreen Curriculum

Student 1: I've noticed in the two year programs I was in I learned how to learn very well. ... The school makes me question everything that I'm learning to a point that I don't even know what's good and what's bad anymore. ... Now after two and a half years of school and studying educational philosophy and all that stuff, I don't know what's good anymore. And if anything it's just made me question all the ethical ideals that society has placed upon me since the beginning of my life.

Student 2: So it's given you an analytical mind.

Student 1: Very much so, and I would think that would be .. what learning how to learn begins with.

Student 3: If you go to another school, you just get thrown into a discipline, you don't start from the bottom. When you come here, everything you already knew kinda gets broken down and then you rebuild it in a different sense, and I think it's a good sense.

Facilitator: Can you say more about that sense of things being broken down? What's being broken down?

Student 3: I think it's the structure of classes and the fact that there are seminars and not lectures all the time. ...If everyone's kinda struggling with something you can work through it instead of just going home and working on it on your own. Because the school supports the fact that we're all learning.

Student 1: I'd say any ideal I thought I once had has been broken down.

Student 3: Damaged, at least.

Student 1: Yeah, very much so.

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I think one of the greatest parts about Evergreen is it teaches you how to become a responsible person. I think when you get outside of school and you're in the working realm, what people are looking for is a responsible person to fill jobs. I think what we're trying to do is sell ourselves once we leave the school, and I think Evergreen puts us in a perfect position to be able to do that. I also think the reason there aren't majors here is because you can study this wide variety of things but at the same time when you do want to focus on one small thing you can write a contract for it and you can work with a teacher closely or you can take a program if it is offered in that area of study. I really think the school has every option for the student and honestly I think it is the best liberal arts school in the country.

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I've had some pretty confrontational seminars but after a few weeks of that the teacher, the faculty did step in and say, "Okay, after this seminar, we're going to talk about how seminar went well and what went wrong." It's kind of a debriefing afterwards were everyone can be like, "Well, I remember this argument that we had, and it wasn't good and we need to resolve it." So, I think that's a great improvement on seminar, because if you have some sort of conflict that there's either two people involved or two sides of the room involved, you can discuss it and learn across your differences. Everybody has something to say.

Challenges of the Evergreen Curriculum

Trying to figure out how to get through it and find what I want, figure out what I want then find it in the curriculum offerings, has been a challenge and a source of stress for me as someone who only has two years here. If I had four years it might be a little different. ... I think that's really important, and I think that should be addressed ... by perhaps admissions, orientation, a follow up orientation for new students.

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Student 1: If you wanted to look at fall courses here at Evergreen for fall of 2008, it's hard to find a curriculum or a program, if you are thinking that far ahead. I like to plan ahead. It's hard to pinpoint. ... It was quarter by quarter, you didn't know about the classes in the evening and weekend schedule until it came up somewhere during the quarter that you're presently in.

Student 2: And not having a major to kind of semi-chart you along and give you some sort of guidance, it's stressful.

Student 1: And then when I went to ask about it, everybody was professional in their explanation, but they didn't have an answer. ... I don't like that, it doesn't satisfy me when you say, "Well, that's the way we do it here at Evergreen." You see, that leaves a long pause of thinking, "There's a void there, but you didn't address it, you said that's the way we do it here at Evergreen." Now here the glass at Evergreen, the glass is more than half full, it's a very fine school. Very fine faculty, I really support that. But there is a void in that area.

Strengths/Challenges of the Evergreen Curriculum

Student 1: A lot of the time when it came to writing seminars, I found a lot more than not people would just sit around [saying], "Oh yeah, this is good, there's not really much you can do to make that better." The biggest problem was that doesn't help anybody. That's a complaint that I hear a lot and I've been through these writing seminars and that happened to me a lot. I didn't really know what to do about it, I just tried to make my writing better as I could and go to the writing center, talk to outside influences about how to make my writing better. I think it really just comes down to people yet again taking that personal responsibility.

Student 2: And everybody has to be on the boat.

Student 3: I've had a really good experience with writing seminars. ... Maybe it's the modeling of the faculty setting the ground rules. Having ground rules is helpful, having them announced and having everybody agree that these are the ground rules for the writing workshop. ... And it's great, it works really well. Really well. It's been very very helpful, and people are ... cutting in, really going for it, saying things that really matter, so I've had a different experience.

Student 1: And I would say occasionally ... there'd be a few people that would be really into it and there'd be a good number that really weren't. ... I think it just comes down to who's motivated and who's not.

Student 3: I also think some people just don't know what they think yet. ... Being called on to announce an opinion about somebody else's work is scary. I think some people just are shy and drawing out the people who don't want to participate for whatever reason is

another thing, another opportunity in that learning process for the people who are a little braver or more experienced.

Advising / Resources

Student 1: I came to this school after being in labor for a number of years. I came to this school with nowhere to go, so I didn't know everything, and I still don't know everything ... I was pretty good at searching out people or the answer, not that I found every answer, but I found that, and I don't want to be negative, I found that people were filling positions and they were dressed professionally and they were educated and they had their degree on the wall, and I got a lot of validation and I got a lot of positive comments. They helped me struggle through some things myself, they helped me answer my own questions some of the time, but ... maybe the questions I was answering were too tough. ... I made it through, but I don't think as a youngster I would have made it through. Because when I went into these offices and I sought out these people in academic advising or people that had been here awhile in other positions, they're nice to talk to and they will give some direction but I looked in their eyes and some of the time, I mean, they don't know me, they don't know my background, but some of the time I felt they were just validating, like "You're doing fine, whatever you decide on is okay." I actually wanted to hear somebody say, "Here's what you should be doing, I've been in elementary education and here's who I would see, here's what I would actually want to teach at this school." They didn't have those answers. And I don't want to pick on them because I got to know them in my three years, they're nice people, but they didn't know the answers. They're educated and they're hard workers and they're always there, and I found my own direction. ... It made me stronger. I went in there thinking once I left the office talking with them, I thought, "Man, nice person, but I gotta go do some research on my own." And I found my own way after talking with certain people in those positions.

Facilitator: If you had been going into this conference that you mentioned, what were you hoping to achieve, and what was your goal and what didn't happen?

Student 1: I want to be a teacher, and I walked in, I wanted to speak to somebody who knew all the 55 questions about teacher, which direction, what to pursue, where to start, what classes, here at Evergreen what classes in the MIT, which school should I be doing my student teaching at, which schools would I want to volunteer at local. You know, Eastside, Westside. So I asked a ton of questions and I stayed in there a long time, I got my hour's worth, but I could see as we got towards the end of the hour, I'm very observant, I could see they started looking at their watch. And I'm thinking, "Maybe they think I've been here too long, maybe they're uncomfortable with me." But I would see that person somewhere along the line, more than once, because I had more questions maybe the next quarter. So I got to know all the academic advisors and I asked questions about teaching, courses related to teaching, how can I stack my credits in a certain area for elementary education, what are my choices, how about the faculty, and I didn't get a clear directions, I didn't get a clear answer. ... But I figured it out on my own.

Student 2: I sought out assistance from academic advising and I think that ... they don't put it in your lap, you have to figure out what you want, and they'll help you find the route to whatever. ... But the problem was I didn't know what I wanted. And so that was a frustrating experience. But I owned that, because ... I just needed to get in and start

taking classes and figure out what I wanted, and that was really the whole point of me coming back to school anyhow, but I also have utilized my faculty. Very helpful.

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Student 1: I used the academic advising mostly in my first two quarters here, and I think that was really helpful because, although I haven't used it lately ... as I was starting out Evergreen everything was so overwhelming. ... I felt like I got some guidance, and [the advisor] gave me some things to help me figure out what I wanted to do. So I thought that was helpful.

Facilitator: Have you used faculty or other students? ... You said these were earlier experiences.

Student 1: Well, this is only my second year here, so I guess it's just been a while since I've gone to advising, but definitely faculty. Sometimes they'll be very blunt with you. ... I've had different reactions from faculty when you want to talk about personal motivation or something like that.

Facilitator: When they're blunt with you, what do you mean?

Student 1: "Well, you know, that's kinda your problem, not mine" – I've gotten that from someone. But some of my teachers have been like "Oh, let's sit down and talk about this," because you have a different kind of connection with those teachers. But from other students, not always very helpful. I mean, depending. I guess its maturity level in my first-year class. Just like, "Oh, whatever, my parents are paying for school, I don't have to know what I wanna do."

Student 2: My experience with academic advising freshman year, I went in my first quarter, didn't get much accomplished, I guess I walked in not knowing what I wanted ... I was working really hard. ... I didn't know what I wanted. They said, "Well, you just have to work hard and I think that that's all there is to it." And that was pretty good advice, the same advice I get from my dad, same advice I get from my mom. So I've been working really hard for the past two and a half years, although at Evergreen I don't think you can quite work hard enough, which is kinda depressing because [then] you realize that all you have time for is school ... So, you find yourself trackless but yet so hard-working that anybody's willing to hire you. ... Which I think is a good thing, and I think the point of life, well, one of the points of life that you have to figure out is how to live and the major thing that you have to do is work and be able to work hard and be responsible about everything that you do.

Facilitator: But there's more to it. You might even actually be interested in it.

Student 2: Well, that too. My friend who was my roommate freshman year went to academic advising and he didn't know what he wanted to do, and they said, "Well, you can either make it for yourself or you can't," and he left after the first quarter. And I figured I would stick it out, that's just my attitude on things, and I think I've done pretty well in comparison. I can now write a pretty decent paper.

Student 3: I think it's a slippery slope. On one hand I think it seems like there needs to be a little more handholding for new students or young students, freshmen or transfer students. But on the other hand it forces you. It seems a little harsh like the law of the wild, you either can't handle it or you handle it.

Facilitator: Sink or swim.

Student 3: Exactly. But the benefits of being one of the people who figures it out are great, and I don't know if that make it worth losing people that leave or come away with

a less-than-pleasant experience because having all that choice is not really a comfortable feeling a lot of the time.

The Five Foci

Personally, when somebody asks me about Evergreen, about what I'm doing here, [the five foci have] given me some terms to mention and it's given me some articulate wording. ... I'm starting to feel educated after three years, after repeating those terms and discussing them with fellow students and faculty, and I'm actually starting to believe in them.

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Student 1: Collaborative learning is a good thing. In the middle of a group project it's hard to remember sometimes, but it's a good thing, there's a benefit.

Student 2: In some of my classes ... the syllabus said collaborative learning, and the professors stated collaborative learning. Then the professor would assign groups, and then the professor would back off, expecting that collaborative learning would be going on. [But in one class], that was not collaborative learning, the professor was a young new person teaching that class and stated collaborative learning and backed off, and when there wasn't collaborative learning going on, the professor didn't step in. We were assigned groups, and so I remember being in a group ... [with] three individuals doing individual learning. I needed collaborative learning. I need it and I didn't get it. So that's when I changed groups. ... I thought it was obvious the professor was observing but the professor wasn't. It was a struggle for me in that particular class.

Student 1: The collaborative learning is one of the most sticky, complicated and important things that happens here, and it can be infuriating, but it's just a microcosm of what happens in the real world, in the work world. This happens all the time ... because there's always gonna be somebody who doesn't do the work you think they're gonna do or should do, and there's always somebody who tries to lord over everybody and take charge, and navigating those complicated relationships is where the learning takes place, not so much in the academic learning.

Student 2: And I've seen that in the real world, because I've been in the real world a long time in labor and I've seen that, that's what happens. But coming here to Evergreen I thought, "Well, they probably mean it! They say collaborative learning, so it's going to be different from what I experienced the last 40 years."

Student 1: But the instructors can't make it happen.

Student 2: The thing is they promise it in the syllabus, and they promise it in the description, and that's why I sign up for it. ... But when there isn't collaborative learning, what do you do when you're in that spot?

Student 1: That's an opportunity to talk to the faculty member and seek out some assistance maybe from some of the tutoring centers or directly address the individuals and try and generate it.

Student 2: Try that.

Student 1: I have!

Student 2: I didn't work for me.

Student 1: It doesn't work quickly, but that's my process.

Student 2: That's just one example, I need collaborative learning and in some groups in some classes it worked perfect but in some groups it didn't, it failed.

Student 3: Well, some faculty are different, some of them ... encourage you to interrupt and ask, "How does this relate to the class?" or "How does this relate to my learning?" and where [you] don't see these things happening, and they want to hear that. Others don't want to hear it at all, and they're like, "This is how we're doing it."

Student 1: Yeah, personal responsibility here is just endless.

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Student 1: Personal engagement, it started as soon as I got here. I feel that I have all balls in the air all the time. The kinds of ideas that are raised in the limited amount of class time that we have send me seeking information outside the class texts and I feel profoundly engaged. I feel that all cylinders are firing while I'm here. I think because I don't have anybody telling me what to do it makes me dive in into areas that if I knew what the class was going to be like as compared to the course description that makes me sign up for it, if I knew what it was going to do I would probably be like, "Oh, no, I don't think I can handle that, I have my limitation." Restoring Landscapes was one of those. But because I found myself in over my head, I engaged so thoroughly, I engaged so much. And every class has been that way so far. Every time I think I'm making a really careful choice and analyzing what it's going to be like and asking all the questions I can ask I still find myself just immersed and not struggling exactly but paddling wildly.

Student 2: Yeah, I would agree with that. I feel engaged, definitely feel engaged, and I think that the personal engagement really relates to ... linking theory to practical applications, because if you're engaged you apply it to just about everything in your life. So something that someone says in seminar can really stick with you for a long time or something profound that you have learned definitely becomes something practical later. I mean, that's how I take the practical application thing, in your everyday life you kind of change either your ethics or your ideas.

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Facilitator: If you looked at that list of [the five foci], what's the thing we do best?

Students 1 & 2: Interdisciplinary study.

Facilitator: What do you think that means? What does interdisciplinary study mean?

Student 1: The fact that there can be a class called Visualizing Ecology and you take art and field ecology from three teachers but you're learning five different things as you're in the field and five different things as you're in the art studio and relating it back and forth.

Student 2: And it all matters.

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That says another thing about interdisciplinary study, that it integrate both qualitative and quantitative, so it brings together in one program things that I, for instance, do my very best to avoid. And so it's annoying that I can't avoid it, but it's beneficial, because if I have to deal with it, I want it to matter, and it matters in the context of an interdisciplinary program. ... And it matters, so you can really appreciate it in a way that you would never be able to by just taking a two-unit or four-unit class.