

M & M II: The Current Crisis

The M & M Manifesto, like Christ, has ascended into the Evergreen heaven. Published in the spring of 1972, that manifesto addressed some of the leading problems retarding the College's development. The analysis and recommendations in the M & M have long since been spirited away, to some become a hoary ideal to be venerated but not followed, but many of the problems examined there, exacerbated by some new ones, are still with us.

Witness recent events. Underenrollment -- slight this year, maybe worse next. Conflict about curriculum. Plans to reorganize the College. Widespread fear, rumor, confusion. Students marching on the Provost's office (he was out). Moratorium more or less declared. Crisis on campus like three-and-a-half years ago.

This time around, some people are taking steps to alleviate what they think is the most pressing problem, underenrollment. The Admissions Master Plan, which aims to involve faculty (and hopefully students) in student recruitment, should help. By increasing the opportunities for part-time study and by offering off-campus academic work, we have probably also increased our attractiveness to the surrounding community. Before the current crisis, our curriculum was being expanded through such efforts as Willie Parson's to develop External Programs and Rudy Martin's and George Kinnear's to include business studies in our offerings. All these measures will likely bring more students to Evergreen. However, they represent only piecemeal reforms that do not address the fundamental issue facing the College. Neither do the various plans for reorganization.

The answer to our underenrollment problem is not merely full enrollment, for a drastic increase in our numbers tomorrow would still leave us without an explanation of why we were underenrolled in the first place. Everyone knows undergraduate enrollments are declining nation-wide, and will continue to do so for awhile. The worst thing we could do, even in these grim circumstances, would be to retreat from the Evergreen experiment as originally conceived. What we must do instead is clarify the experiment itself, both to ourselves and to others. In other words, we must forge an identity for this institution.

Evergreen will define itself only by deciding what it stands for academically, how it will govern itself, and what its standards for judging its performance should be. At present (as has been the case since the beginning) Evergreen is ambiguous about the first of these, impractical about the second, and gutless about the third.

We argue that these three parts of the Evergreen enterprise are closely inter-related -- at most distinguishable, but not separable -- and we are convinced that any serious discussion of the College, however much it aims to refine each one of these, must also clarify the connections among them.

I. Academic Identity

A college cannot permit itself to be defined wholly, or even primarily, by its procedures. Most of Evergreen's current self-definition has to do with process -- e.g., coordinated study, contract study, internship, in short how we do things, not what we do. Such a bureaucratic definition may be attractive to many, but it proves calamitous to all sooner or later. Rather, a college should define itself first by its conception of knowledge, and only second by its approaches to learning. The view of knowledge that a college values is its center.

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 image 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. Colleges and universities legitimize the fragmentation even further by dividing and subdividing knowledge into more and more disciplines. They then direct students into fewer and fewer of them until only one remains and is "mastered" at which point the undergraduate major is achieved or the Ph.D. is granted.

By refusing to accept the fragmentation of knowledge as legitimate, Evergreen can take the first step toward developing a holistic view of knowledge. Such a view would lead faculty and students alike to recognize the paradox that a better one knows a single discipline, the better one knows its limitations, and therefore the more one appreciates the necessity of knowing other disciplines. This does not mean that the biologist becomes a historian or the poet a physicist. What it does mean is that the more familiar each is with the assumptions, methodologies, and values of the other, the better a biologist, historian, physicist, or poet he or she will become. Students, on the other hand, will have an advantage that their mentors didn't have -- namely the opportunity to grasp the assumptions, methodologies, and values of several disciplines brought together to explore major issues of the human condition without having first to break through disciplinary prejudices. Students are ignorant by definition to be sure, but it is just as true that the educator must himself be educated. And in the scheme outlined here, students and teachers meet on the ground of new equality -- not the bullshit equality so frequently advocated around here, but one which recognizes the real condition of both groups. The more frequent and intimate the academic interactions among people from the various disciplines, the clearer it will be that there are major questions about the human condition that cannot even be framed from the standpoint of a single discipline, let alone be pursued or answered. For example, biology alone, while it may one day win the war on cancer can never even ask how that war is similar to or different from germ warfare. Biology cannot make this vital distinction, and the individual biologist can make it only by resorting to means outside the discipline (e.g. moral, religious, political beliefs). Equally frustrating dilemmas face workers in all other single disciplines, as well as workers among the disciplines when that work does not proceed from the premise that knowledge should be reunified. Evergreen should value as its center the view that knowledge out to be reunified. This means then that Evergreen's mission is to make the exploration of the political, ethical, scientific, and aesthetic questions arising from attempts to reunify knowledge the heart of the education we offer.

Accepting the academic identity asserted here determines two significant aspects of the College: (1) how we teach, and (2) how we present the College to people who are unfamiliar with it. To the first of these. Coordinated study has to be the core mode of teaching and learning at Evergreen. It is the most practical means by which students and teachers can discover and examine the prime questions that arise from human experience. While the extraordinary individual teacher or student may achieve some of the same results that the best coordinated studies do, more often than not the aims of the College can best be served by teams of teachers and groups of students working together. Therefore, we recommend the following:

1. More than half of the College's faculty, students and resources must be committed to coordinated study every year.
2. Faculty members must expect to spend no more than one year of each three-year contract cycle in a mode or function other than coordinated study, and all new teachers must begin their work at Evergreen in coordinated study teams.
3. To receive an Evergreen bachelor's degree, students must spend at least one full academic year in coordinated study (which corresponds with the present one-year residency requirement).

The reasons why these three recommendations make sense are easy to understand, for they follow directly from the academic identity that we're advocating for the College. Having committed more than half our faculty, students and resources to coordinated study, we should then be able to determine clearly how contract and modular studies might extend or support what we're doing in coordinated study. And we should offer only those that do. Second, this commitment to coordinated study will provide deans and faculty members planning guides and some pause before dissolving coordinated study programs for simple reasons like personality conflicts. Third, the requirement that students spend at least a year in coordinated study before they graduate, like all requirements properly conceived, grows out of the nature of study, which at this institution is implied in its academic identity.

These recommendations and their rationale make no sense whatsoever unless we vastly improve the quality of the coordinated studies we offer. We can do that only if those faculty members who have demonstrated their competence in this mode take seriously their responsibility to teach this craft to their peers. They can meet this responsibility through their faculty teams, which teams ought to be staffed on the basis of the comparative success of the faculty members under consideration and of the subject matter requirements growing out of the study to be undertaken. In addition, all deans and faculty members should strive to use such institutional structures as faculty seminars, dean/faculty groups, the Faculty Development desk programs, and each-one-teach-one arrangements (like the RULE and Danforth grants) to help each other learn to think imaginatively about and teach in coordinated studies.

In presenting the College's programs to outsiders, we need to revise all our printed material and the things we say in order to develop a focus on our academic identity first, and on our methods second. (Have you read the catalogue or tried to explain the College lately?). Yes, we should tell people -- students, parents, faculty candidates, others -- that we teach biology, psychology, physics, history, art, etc., and that we will always teach these subjects. We must also tell people that at Evergreen we teach these subjects for the most part in coordinated studies, the mode best designed to reveal those core questions about human experience in addition to questions rooted in the academic disciplines. Having made this clear, we must emphasize that we teach these subjects in their historical contexts and through practical application when it makes sense to do so. We can even agree to stress the successes of our better programs -- some of those that have dealt with questions pertaining to the environment, human growth and development and social change. Explanations like these would make clear to people what they can reasonably expect of the College, which expectations are necessarily different from those one can have of a church, a welfare agency, or a political party.

If Evergreen will decide what it is, derive some self-confidence from that definition, and advertise itself accurately, then at least we will have a chance of solving many of the problems that face us, including underenrollment.

II. Governance

An academic identity that characterizes an institution requires a decision-making system that supports that identity rather than contradicts it. Our general failure to do coordinated study well and our wrong-headed and ineffectual governance system are worthy only of each other. The current governance system is self-contradictory. It is a conflict-management model rather than a decision-making one. It is less a system for making decisions than a system for unmaking them. Under it, every decision is appealable, irrespective of whether the appeal arises from personal whim or from institutional inequity. Thus some decisions are challenged on the basis of their implications; others are challenged simply because they are decisions. The system we have now is incapable of distinguishing between these two appeals. The bizarre result of this process is that most significant debate occurs after decisions are made instead of before, and is accordingly used to undermine rather than make them.

The DTF habit fragments the College's needs for administration into a series of discrete tasks to be performed by theoretically disinterested, randomly selected individuals and thus denies the existence of separate interest groups. It also usurps the prerogative of administrators by serving the ends of decision-making instead of bringing community thinking to bear on specific problems, thereby making "locatability and accountability" impossible. Thus administrators know they are faced with but two choices upon receiving reports from DTF's they have convened: either rubber-stamp the report or be dragged through long and costly appeal proceedings. In sum, the present governance system is apolitical at its core; that is, it lacks a concept of the common good and enshrines the principle of unlimited individualism in its place.

COG simply has to go.

We must replace COG with some realistic and responsive form of representational campus government. This system should define and articulate the common good and render decisions that are consistent with our institutional identity. The main features of such a system would include at least:

1. Forum(s) for debating significant College issues and for expressing the collective will of the community in the form of College policy.
2. Mechanisms for (a) providing fair representation in the forum(s) and for (b) transmitting the will of the membership to the appropriate locatable and accountable administrator.
3. Clear lines of administrative authority bound by College policy.
4. An appeal system which provides for review of administrative decisions, but not academic ones (e.g. credit hassles, etc.).

III. Faculty Evaluation

The institutional identity advocated here, along with the system of government to buttress it, depend upon a workable system of evaluation, especially of faculty. We already have both criteria and procedures for evaluation of exempt and classified staff (EAC, HEPB Regulations). For all their shortcomings, we also have criteria and procedures for judging student performance. We even have procedures for evaluating faculty. What we lack are standards for judging the quality of their work.

Sadly, there are reasons why the faculty, the deans, the Provost and the President have been content with mere evaluation procedures and have failed to produce usable criteria for assessing faculty performance. For one thing, academics are generally not trained to think about teaching -- they learn "subject matter." However, at Evergreen we do think about our teaching, but we insist that this "art" is so ephemeral and precious that it transcends all efforts to judge it in reasonably objective, and mutually agreed upon terms. As a consequence, the Evergreen faculty does not know what to judge in its work or how to judge it. Ironically, the system originally set up to evaluate faculty courageous enough to subject it's work to public scrutiny has become a system that protects a faculty so far too fearful to evaluate itself rigorously.

While serious discussion of faculty evaluation at Evergreen is usually taken to mean that someone is eager to fire someone else, we are interested in finding criteria for measuring improvement in faculty performance as well as for establishing cause for dismissal. Here are some essential criteria for faculty evaluation which we think are in keeping with the institutional definition that we advocate:

1. Sufficient strength in one's discipline to be able to

conceive and plan substantial coordinated study programs. For example, knowledge about and contribution of materials pertinent to any program that one is planning (books, films, music, experiments, procedures, etc.). Use of one's disciplinary assumptions, methodologies and values to help shape a program's concept.

2. Use of one's disciplinary background in the daily operation of any program one is working in: demonstrating how the assumptions, methodologies and values of one's discipline bear on the central questions of the program.
3. Proximity to one's discipline, or to one's demonstrated competence outside that discipline, of the individual contracts and internships one negotiates with students.
4. Evidence of efforts to teach students basic skills (reading, writing, non-verbal literacy) needed in the study of a program's central questions.
5. Evidence of ability to listen to students and use their observations and suggestions to improve a program or contract and the faculty member's performance in it.
6. The preparation of precise evaluations which are descriptive and analytical, and which offer suggestions for improving one's own performance and that of colleagues and students.

Faculty evaluation should reveal patterns of faculty performance, which patterns should form the basis for retention and non-reappointment decisions. A single criterion, rather than a pattern of performance, should be the basis for faculty dismissal only in the most extraordinary cases.

Note: We are willing to adopt and live by the principal tenets in this statement. We think they should be debated on their merits, but we do not think haggling over picky details which could be worked out later should sidetrack discussion of these principles. We are eager to join others in creating Evergreen.

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David Marr

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