

## Chapter 15

# Evergreen: Ever Green?

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Evergreen State College, a 4-year, state-supported, liberal arts college, is a survivor, one of the few major experiments in curricular innovation arising from the decade of the sixties which remains functioning at the beginning of the 90s. Established in 1971 and located in a wooded area outside Olympia, its early students were inclined toward a less structured approach to studying liberal arts than was common in more traditional institutions—especially state supported colleges and universities. Investigations by Jones and Smith (1984) suggested that little has changed and that while the school now awards bachelor's degrees in everything from creative writing to marine biology, there are no formal majors nor any letter grades. The faculty team-teaches a multidisciplinary core of subjects and gives written evaluations of students' work. Despite its nonconformity, Evergreen's academic reputation is rated highly in the region by college presidents and deans.

### The Origins of Innovation

More than 70 years before Evergreen, another college carried the banner of innovation into Olympia. In 1891, the Rev. J. R. Chaplin platted an area on Cooper Point Peninsula where he hoped to begin a utopian community with its own college, People's University. Chaplin started his dream closer to downtown Olympia in 1900, hoping to move soon. But People's University lasted only until 1906 despite, or perhaps because of, new ideas such as emphasizing practical methods of learning and offering education to working students. Evergreen owes even a greater debt to more recent innovative colleges. Most, if not all, of the educational concepts Evergreen now employs were first used in experimental programs and institutions as far back as the 1960s (Clemens, 1987).

Although nameless until 1968, the idea of a new college in Washington State first surfaced in 1964. Richard Jones (1981) concluded that the student unrest of the 1960s and the demands it made for improvements in the quality of undergraduate teaching resulted in a number of state-instituted, "alternative" colleges. Evergreen State College was among those colleges which were attempting to explore new ways of serving the educational needs of America's young people. These colleges also caused much controversy by attempting to challenge the status quo. Jones (1981) reported that not all experimental colleges have survived as alternative colleges, and those which have survived have maintained their integrity as experiments in varying degrees.

The idea for establishing Evergreen State College originated with the Council of Presidents, a group composed of the presidents of Washington's five public-supported universities and colleges. A report issued

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by the Council in November, 1964, concluded that another college was needed to balance the geographical distribution of the existing institutions, especially since Western Washington was growing at a more rapid rate than the rest of the state. With the University of Washington in Seattle and Western Washington State College in Bellingham, the Council noted that southwest Washington was the only region without a 4-year public college. Based on the Council's recommendations, the Washington State Legislature created the Temporary Advisory Council on Public Higher Education in 1965. This group of legislators, educators and community leaders was charged with determining if and when a new college was needed, where it should be located and what kind of college it should be (Clemens, 1987).

Evergreen's founding trustees consisted of prominent members of the community such as bankers, businessmen, legislators, contractors and community activists. These trustees have had a great impact on the survival of the experiment. Right from the beginning, they worked hand in hand with the educators and state officials in sharing decisions. For instance, the hiring of Evergreen's first president and the initial group of administrators rested in their hands. In 1967 the state of Washington inaugurated this new 4-year college. The state capital, Olympia, was chosen as the site. The board of trustees hired Charles McCann, then dean of the faculty at Central Washington State College as the first president of Evergreen (Jones and Smith, 1984). He in turn, with the support and encouragement of the trustees, made his initial choices based on a strategy for constructive change. First aboard were the vice presidents: Dean Clabaugh, the College's executive director, as vice president for business; Joe Shoben, from the State University of New York at Buffalo, as executive vice president; and Dave Barry as vice president for academics. Jones (1981) reported that administrators were hired and told to recruit a small and distinguished group of planning faculty. Evergreen's three founding deans were Mervyn Cadwallader; Don Humphrey, who had headed an interdisciplinary science program at Oregon State University; and Charles Teske, who had experience with independent learning at Oberlin College (McHenry, 1977).

The Evergreen State College 20-year report (1987) concluded that with the assistance of farsighted legislative funding, McCann, Barry and the original deans were able to hire 18 faculty members prior to opening day, 1971. Jones (1981) reported that the 18 members of the planning faculty, which were given the academic year of 1970-71 to design the college's specific policies and programs, were carefully recruited for their experience in experimental education. The founding faculty included advocates of the western classics, self-paced and collaborative learning, independent study, cooperative and wilderness education, and several veterans of Cadwallader's interdisciplinary programs at San Jose State and Old Westbury.

Yet even though Evergreen was established because there was a regional need for such a college, there was one advocate in particular who made this dream possible. His name was Mervyn Cadwallader, a disciple of Alexander Meiklejohn and an ally of John Tussman. Cadwallader had previously directed an experimental program at San Jose State College which imitated a Tussman innovation at UC Berkeley. Jones (1981) commented that Dean Cadwallader emerged as Evergreen's first acknowledged visionary. His strength was his ability to envision and articulate the academic objectives for Evergreen. While the college's first president, Charles McCann, was a powerful advocate of individualized education and innovation, he initiated no particular innovations of his own (Jones, 1981). He remained Evergreen's leader for 9 years and was followed by the former governor, Dan Evans, in 1977.

## **The Meiklejohn-Tussman Connection**

Jones stated that in the autumn of 1970 a small book, *Experiment at Berkeley*, by Joseph Tussman was read and discussed by 18 men who had been invited to Olympia, Washington, to design an alternative college. This experience was to have a decisive influence on the development of one of the most revealing experiments in the history of American higher education. Cadwallader, who suggested that they read the book, was greatly inspired by Tussman's moral curriculum. He was hoping that the planning faculty at

Evergreen would find the Tussman program appealing and adopt it. To his surprise none of the planning faculty included this moral curriculum in the first year's offerings. Tussman's innovative program resembled Alexander Meiklejohn's experimental college at the University of Wisconsin. Both irony and serendipity suffuse this Meiklejohn-Tussman-Evergreen lineage (Jones, 1981). The annals of Evergreen have shown that Tussman was primarily attracted to Meiklejohn's model on curricular grounds, its concern with "initiation in the great political vocations." He sought to achieve this objective by studying some of the seminal works of classical Greece, 17th-century England, and the United States Supreme Court. Investigations by Jones suggested that it was not, however, the curricular innovation of these two men which claimed the imaginations of the Evergreen planning faculty in 1970. What influenced them most was the pedagogical innovation which both men employed in their curricular objectives: substituting the traditional format of separate teachers, courses, and times, for the creation of groups of students, who are all studying the same things at the same time, over a prolonged period (Jones, 1981).

The history of the Meiklejohn-Tussman experiments confirms that Evergreen was not a radical new invention. Instead it was the continuation of an educational strategy which was first tried at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s, and then at San Jose State, and then at Berkeley just a few years before it was eventually tried at Olympia.

## Founding Purposes

Evergreen State College was created to be a different, nontraditional institution, one which did not duplicate the other regional colleges. The planning faculty were given 1 year to decide what kind of college it would be. Furthermore they were to prepare a curriculum for October, 1971, when the first one thousand students would begin.

The purposes for creating the college as described by Jones and Smith (1984) included the following elements:

1. To serve the needs of Southwest Washington where much of the demographic growth was expected. The authorization bill referred to Evergreen as "Southwest Washington State College" in language which paralleled the authorizations of the other three regional institutions; Western, Central, and Eastern.
2. To provide services to state government and its employees. The selection of Olympia, the capital city, as the site for the new college seemed to give the planners this additional function.
3. To develop an innovative structure that would not simply duplicate the existing academic resources of the state. The State Senator who headed the Temporary Advisory Council of Public Education (which recommended the new college) stated at the first meeting of the incipient Board of Trustees, "It was not the intent of the Legislature that this be just another 4-year college; it is a unique opportunity to meet the needs of the students of today and the future because the planning will not be bound by any rigid structure of tradition as are the existing colleges, nor by any overall central authority, as is the case in many states."

"The basic structure of our coordinated studies program," Jones (1984) wrote, "follows Tussman's model to the letter." It was multidisciplinary and theme oriented; it depended on small, intensive seminars; and there were common reading lists and schedules. At Berkeley, however, Mr. Tussman's experiment was one small program in a large institution, as Mr. Meiklejohn's had been at Wisconsin. At Evergreen ten coordinated-studies programs are offered each year and form the focus of the entire curriculum. And at Evergreen, apparently, the structure has achieved its critical mass (The Chronicle, 1984).

## Current Demographics

The original student body of 1,000 in 1971 included a fair number of hippie types. The Chronicle of Higher Education (November 14:1984) reported that the academic year 1976-1977 saw the peak enrollment of 2530 headcount, and then the enrollment began to drop. True, its enrollment has never approached the figure of 10,000 that was originally predicted. In 1986 the enrollment reached 2,838 which was the largest ever. The total enrollment for fall 1990 was 3,310. Of these, 3,125 were undergraduate students and 185 were graduate students. Fifty-seven percent are women, 43 percent are men. The student body is increasing and the college seems to be attracting more women than men. The focus remains principally upon undergraduate students.

According to the Evergreen State College Institutional Report (1989) there were 153 full-time regular faculty in 1989 and 30 part-time adjunct faculty. Jones (1981) reported that because of declining enrollment Evergreen has been able to staff some programs at a 1 to 15 faculty-student ratio. While an ominous trend for the college, this has been good for the experiment.

A brief overview of the student body underscores the diversity of Evergreen students. The first student body in 1971 was composed of students from 35 Washington counties, 41 states, and 3 foreign countries (Clemens, 1987). There were various reasons for students to choose such a college. Some were discontent with previous college experiences, some believed they could do their own thing, some were simply looking for something different. But all held one thing in common: taking risks. They entered a college with no history, a very mixed image and still in the process of defining itself. At least faculty and staff were being paid for risk taking. In a sense the first Evergreen students were the true pioneers.

Most scholarly articles praise Evergreen for its dedicated faculty and emphasis on teaching. Seventy-four percent of the faculty hold the Ph.D. or its equivalent. Males teachers outnumber their female counterparts by a 2:1 ratio. Dr. Charles McCann, former dean of the faculty at Central Washington State College and an articulate spokesman for individualizing the college learning experience was selected to be the first president of Evergreen College. McHenry (1977) explained that most faculty members were hired because of a special competency which this new college needed. The three founding deans all matched this model. Mervyn Cadwallader, an exponent of the "moral curriculum," was hired because he had experience with interdisciplinary study at San Jose and SUNY Old Westbury. Charles Teske had experience administering independent study at Oberlin. And Don Humphrey had built a reputation for imaginative interdisciplinary work in the sciences at Oregon State. Other faculty members were attracted to the College because of their quest for a place to teach that emphasized classroom contact with students rather than faculty research in the lab. The Olympia campus is partially residential; 27 percent of the students live on the campus in 11 residences and 19 modular duplexes. The rest live nearby in rural houses or in the communities of Olympia, Lacey, or Tumwater. There is a regular bus service between the campus and Olympia. The geographical location of the college meets the needs of its students. The College is situated on 1,000 acres of woods and hills and has a 3,300-foot waterfront (salt water) just outside the city of Olympia, Washington's capital. The campus, most of which is forested with alder, maple, and Douglas fir, has trails for walking, jogging, and bicycling. The beach provides a perfect place for strolling, sunbathing, and marine research. Enrollment is currently just above 3000 students. Eighty-five percent are full-time. Students are diverse by age: 51 percent are between 18-24 years of age; 34 percent are 30 years or older. The median age is 25.

## Financial Base

The original source of funds for the College came from the state. In fact, it became the first and only publicly funded institution of higher education founded in the State of Washington in the 20th century.

Jones and Smith stated that every year since 1970 there had been at least one bill introduced into the Legislative hopper to close Evergreen, turn it into state offices or at least a southern branch of the University of Washington. But the College has survived, in spite of recurrent bills to abolish it. The reasons for its survival may be based on the support it receives from the community. Among some of the legislators the College is seen as a resource and an asset. The college has also become a very positive force in the community and enjoys a healthy relationship with the city of Olympia. Another reason for its survival may be the fact that it serves as a continuing-education center for state employees and others based in Olympia. When the College was first established it had the support of the state governor, Dan Evans, who later became the second president of the College. That may have had a great impact on the survival of the College.

Joseph Olander, who became the third president from 1985 till present, claims that public funding has eroded for new and existing curricular programs, faculty development, library acquisitions, financial aid, student services, and access to current equipment. He argues that 20 years ago, Washington State spent twice as much per capita on higher education as the rest of the country. He contends that today, although its expenditures have increased slightly, Washington state ranks 22nd out of 50 states. Evergreen is a College, says Olander, whose resources must grow if the future promise of its founding dream is to be fulfilled.

According to College records, in 1985-86, Evergreen received more than \$1.3 million in gifts and grants, topping the million-dollar mark for the first time. The amount of \$24,049,007 was the total for all revenues, including \$3,505,474 from student tuition and fees, and \$13,223,820 state appropriations. But fund raising efforts over the next 10 years must increase ten-fold if Evergreen is to go forward. The College must seek more support from foundations that believe in the Evergreen dream and want to continue to take risks in its behalf (Clemens, 1987).

Tuition for 1986-87 was \$1,212 for an in-state student and \$4,206 for nonresidents. Projected annual undergraduate tuition for 1991-92 is \$1,611 for residents and \$5,649 for non-residents. The estimated cost of books and supplies is \$500. The cost of room and board is approximately \$3400, and personal expenses are estimated at \$1200.

## Student Involvement

Evergreen is a learning community whose mission revolves principally around its academic mission. Therefore, all other aspects of life at Evergreen should not only support the process of teaching and learning, but enhance them as well. There are no community service projects. Students work hand in hand with their faculty members and the administration. Decision making and governance is a joint effort. "Our student-centered philosophy and definition of community has involved students, faculty and staff in the governance process from the very beginning," says Larry Stenberg (Jones 1981). He further stated that campus-wide governance has expanded the learning process beyond the classroom and created a better understanding of Evergreen and how it functions. Also the College has given students a significant role in planning their education through such activities as scheduling and textbook selections.

According to the school prospectus (1990-91), each year the federal government awards the College money to create student jobs. The State of Washington subsidizes career or academically-related employment for students who need such services. The state work study program at Evergreen is used for both on and off-campus positions. Student teaching is another area which allows students to use their skills.

Students do evaluate faculty members, through portfolios and narrative evaluations of their instructors. However, student participation as far as voting for faculty retention or dismissal is very minimal. Since the faculty has limited time for research, seldom do students get involved in scholarly research work.

## Student Profiles

Evergreen is committed to admitting students of diversity. Its low tuition of \$3,550 a year, may be another contributing factor to its popularity among the masses. The College seeks qualified students who demonstrate a spirit of inquiry and a willingness to participate in their educational process within a collaborative framework. The College has certain admissions standards, but they are not highly selective. The College is also interested in attracting students who express an interest in campus or community involvement, a respect and tolerance for individual differences, and a willingness to experiment with innovative modes of teaching and learning. Lowest acceptable secondary school class standing is 50th percentile. Other college entrance exams like SAT or GRE may be considered but they are not required.

Since Evergreen seeks to achieve a diverse student body, special consideration has been given recently to ethnic minorities and nontraditional students. The policy which went into effect in the fall of 1990, replaced one in which students from the top 50 percent of their class were admitted on a first-come, first-serve basis (Gabelnick, Matthews, & Smith 1990). Evergreen has historically sought to reserve some number of spaces in each class for students who have not excelled in high school or college, but who may adapt favorably to a noncompetitive, interdisciplinary academic environment.

## Educational Programs

Evergreen's curriculum eventually offered students four primary ways of earning credits:

1. The year-long coordinated studies programs typically involve: one group lecture, two days of smaller seminars, and perhaps two workshops or laboratory sessions during a week. Most are created and led by three to five faculty members representing various disciplines. They divide their responsibilities in advance by preparing contracts that set out the duties of each member of the team; students also sign contracts detailing their obligations. Faculty members spend the better part of one day a week in a faculty seminar, debating and discussing among themselves a topic related to the program.
2. Group contracts allow a group of students to organize a course of particular interest to them with a willing faculty member or team of faculty members. The course can last from one to three quarters.
3. Individual contracts permit individual students to study topics of their own choice with a single faculty member's sponsorship.
4. Internships, which the college encourages, give upperclassmen opportunities to gain experience in off-campus jobs.

The College also offers courses that are more conventional. Subjects that do not lend themselves to thematic development in seminars, and subjects that are best learned sequentially, do not fare well in the coordinated-studies format. Jones (1981) reports that, "We should not despair if the mathematicians and linguists continue to teach courses." Reaffirmation is a continually recurring theme in the lexicon and literature of Evergreen from 1971 to 1986. Accordingly there have been significant changes in the curriculum. According to a self-evaluation report, although a program may be offered annually, it is never twice the same. The evolution of the curriculum, in fact, began almost as soon as Evergreen opened. The most prominent feature of Evergreen's arts and science education is a curricular commitment to interdisciplinary teaching and learning, not only in team-taught coordinated studies, but also in thematically coherent group and individual contracts. Significant themes and problems promote engagement in study by both students and faculty. It is more important that students reap the benefits of studies growing from among different fields than that they merely acquire specialized knowledge or cover a body of knowledge.

Disciplinary background and sound consistent academic advice become crucial aids to success (Evergreen Report, 1986).

The College has attempted to emphasize Third-World perspectives throughout the curriculum. There have also been three developments which have influenced the curriculum to this day: the realization that “real-world” themes provide the most powerful focus for coordinated studies, the creation of group contracts for specialized learning, and the establishment of the Office of Cooperative Education to find more placements for interns (Jones, 1981). Interdisciplinary work has been considered the academic key to linking theory and practice, especially if it leads to internships, research, and public service projects. One of the factors that contributes to student involvement in the educational program is the part they play in curriculum development. At Evergreen there are dedicated bulletin boards throughout the College where curricular ideas are constantly submitted for public view. This allows the students to share their views with regard to curriculum development. The curriculum is subject to change all the time. But while refining the content and structure of its curriculum, and expanding services to southwest Washington and state government since its beginning, Evergreen has remained remarkably true to the founding vision of a student-centered, interdisciplinary education in the liberal arts.

At Evergreen it is essential that students receive as much individual attention as possible. For example, students regularly organize and conduct book seminars where they read and discuss a book related to their program. The purpose of this exercise is to examine a reading assignment in relation to the program theme. But there are other benefits. Students learn how to work together as a group by paying attention to issues of equivalent participation and relating to implied faculty authority. The seminars are small, and students customarily take responsibility for certain parts of the reading and discussion. They are designed to be truly interactive and give students practice in problem-solving and group dynamics.

Core Programs are coordinated study programs especially planned for first year students. While each core program has a theme, they all expose students to interdisciplinary learning, to certain learning skills, and to the Evergreen approach which places so much responsibility on the individual student to both learn, teach, work collaboratively, and to shed any need for competitiveness when it comes to scholarship.

Individual learning contracts are examples of where a student and faculty member work on a one-to-one basis. The contract may include reading, painting, photography, research, field studies or any activity that involves the student in individualized learning. These are more common for advanced students with well-defined goals. Internships are similar to Individual Learning Contracts. There is a one-to-one relationship with a faculty member, but also with a field supervisor.

Evaluation is another special part of the academic structure and student/teacher relationship. Although there are no grades, there are regular individual evaluation sessions where the teacher and student share and discuss a written evaluation of the student’s activity in the course. The student also prepares a written evaluation of the faculty member. That evaluation goes to the Dean after it has been discussed by the student with the faculty member. The student has to make a transition from passive learning to active learning.

Perhaps the most serious problem for a faculty member, particularly in this teaching-centered institution, is maintaining contact with the profession and personal advancement. The college is acutely aware of this problem. Most faculty members agree that the problem of staying current is real and that the Evergreen curricular structure makes it difficult to provide a reduced teaching load in order to facilitate part-time research.

## **Self-Studies**

According to an Evergreen self-evaluation (1986), this institution has had its problems over the years. The college is fully accredited by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, even though it endures

much criticism by many traditional academicians.

The early years of the College were years of prosperity amid controversy. Student demand was very high, and yet some powerful legislators threatened to close Evergreen even before the College opened. In addition the local press was less than favorable, but the college benefitted from positive, national exposure.

The early period of prosperity did not last long. A lack of careful enrollment analyses and the external environment masked subtle changes until the situation reached crisis proportions. The College tackled the problem head on in the fall of 1978 by commissioning a committee to make recommendations. In February of 1979 the committee submitted its report, the first attempt to develop a marketing plan for Evergreen. In the fall of that year a comprehensive marketing plan went into effect. The plan included very specific strategies for recruiting new students and increasing public awareness. Indeed, the consistent increases of new students, the higher retention of current students, and the excellent press Evergreen has received, indicate that the implementation of this plan has benefited Evergreen considerably.

The College has survived in spite of frequent legislative attempts to abolish it (the most recent in April 1983). Moreover, Evergreen has prospered and is still evolving. During 1985-86 a strategic planning process reaffirmed many of the College's visions, values and aspirations. Some were ideals that finally had become reality. Others, like the "issues carousel" (a set of revolving concerns) have continued as works-in-progress (Clemens, 1987).

The College persists in striving for the lofty goals of the 1967 visionaries, but as Provost Hill points out, the added challenge is to work even harder now so that Evergreen is accepted. Maintaining an innovative spirit and commitment to excellence is demanding in the face of finite resources, increasing enrollment pressures, uncertain economy, and a wavering of faith in higher education across the country. Recent reports on the national crisis in education call for a reaffirmation of many of the fundamental Evergreen principles. Many feel the time is right for education—Evergreen style (Clemens, 1987).

## External Evaluation

From a national perspective Evergreen State College enjoys an increasingly favorable reputation as one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the nation. The November 28, 1983 issue of U.S. News and World Report (1987) published the findings of their survey of 1,308 4-year undergraduate schools. A total of 162 responded, selecting top schools in five categories of liberal arts colleges that grant bachelor's degrees. In the category of smaller comprehensive universities with regional reputations that emphasize the liberal arts, Evergreen State College was ranked first in the Midwest and West.

In September 1984, Parade magazine carried an article written by Lisa Birnbach, citing Evergreen as one of: "the 10 best-kept secrets among American colleges." Two years earlier, Seventeen had proclaimed Evergreen along with a handful of other colleges to be a "hidden gem" in higher education. The media has projected a very favorable image for Evergreen nationally. The alumni of the College have also been instrumental in promoting positive public relations for the College.

The consistent support of state funds is one reason for the viability of Evergreen. For instance, the college does not need to make a profit in order to survive. Political influence has had a great impact on the survival of Evergreen. The former governor of Washington state and the now U.S. Senator Dan Evans, was the second president of the college in 1977-1983. During his term of office he also employed his political credibility and skill as an orator in an ongoing campaign to inform the public about the uniqueness of Evergreen. His contributions have had a lasting effect in propelling this college forward.

The College has also served the needs of the Olympia community and has found a true friend in this city. Some community members have even gone to the extent of forming "Friends of the College" who have made large contributions to Evergreen during turbulent times. There are many publications and books written about the college and this has helped Evergreen immensely.



The survival of the College also stems from involved founders who remain committed to their dreams even now. Some of them are still faculty members at the College or support it in various ways. For example, one member of the original planning group, Richard Jones, is still a faculty member at Evergreen. The first president Charles McCann was there long enough to leave a lasting impression on the College. Nine years of service helped his predecessors to see a tangible pattern to follow. The College also has devoted alumni which help to maintain its viability.

## Conclusions

Evergreen has focused more on effective teaching than student outcomes. With dedicated teachers such an approach to teaching can produce independent, intelligent thinkers. At Evergreen students are encouraged to get involved and to apply their knowledge in a proactive way. Therefore, students not only learn but they also initiate.

Evergreen still retains most of its distinctive features. For example, the Evergreen innovation to operate without academic departments is still sound and alive. Letter grades continue to be taboo and written evaluations are the norm. Evergreen is still committed to collaborative teaching as its primary pedagogical mode. Students who choose Evergreen seem to hold similar values such as serving other people, a purpose in life, and making the world a better place to live.

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