Research and Action Laboratories @ Evergreen
Institutionalizing Collaborative Project-Based Work

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> "The theory and practice of what makes democracy work necessarily include the study of problem solving in action and of the collective capacity to problem-solve—not only to deliberate about the world and set directions for government, but to change the state of the world through collective action, not only to devise and decide but to do." — Xavier de Souza Briggs, *Democracy as Problem Solving*.

> "CIRAL [Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory] is essentially the cherry at the top my educational sundae. It has allowed me to bring the skills, theories, and experiences I've gained from both on and off campus full circle. The clusters and freedom in this program are perfect for when you're ready to conjoin classroom theory and socially conscious real world experience. This program also is a great place for teamwork and collaborative work to thrive. This has allowed people to float between clusters or really focus on something they are passionate about, there's something for everyone. I truly believe that CIRAL embodies the ethic and philosophy of The Evergreen State College."
> — Tim Chen, CIRAL student, Winter & Spring 2013

This proposal is in response to Interim Provost Ken Tabbutt's call for new ideas or experiments for new curricular structure at the Evergreen State College. It proposes an additional educational offering at Evergreen, the Research and Action Laboratory, whose purpose is supporting the design and execution of theme-based, interdisciplinary projects. We believe that the approach being proposed has the potential to address several important issues currently facing Evergreen while strengthening its aspirations and ideals and increasing the efficacy of graduates.

Introduction

We invite readers to envision how this could be used to enrich the education of current and potential students, the interests, skills, and aspirations of faculty members, and, finally, the resilience, relevance, and appeal to diverse students of the college itself. This proposal could only be successful if faculty members believe that this approach had promise and were willing to invest intelligence, creativity, focus, and energy into discovering and realizing that potential by identifying versions of this that worked for them and working to implement them.

Evergreen's philosophy and structure is almost singularly positioned to meet these challenges of educating a diverse population to help face the complexities of our 21st century challenges. We need to continue to improve our ability to meet the challenges educationally and present our vision clearly and effectively to new and existing students.

Project-based education is common at Evergreen, and helps cultivate self-efficacy and other important skills and perspectives. But because project-based education has not been institutionalized, more ambitious projects are unlikely to be initiated or sustained, collaborative faculty and student projects across programs are less likely to be conducted, and resources that are key for project-based offerings are not created or made available across the college. Moreover, students enrolled in the college who are interested in working on collaborative projects cannot find avenues for this nor can our project-based opportunities be marketed in any useful way to potential students. We believe that we should celebrate and foreground our project-based work through research and action laboratories.

We are proposing that Evergreen build on its existing work and further institutionalize project-based learning in order to improve upon our own core competencies, help attract and maintain students, and further our mission. Based largely on our experiences with CIRAL, the Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory we can offer several observations and recommendations. It is our contention, however, that the basic idea presented here is malleable and the ways that the idea is adopted could take many shapes depending on the needs, expectations, objectives, and recommendations of students, faculty members, and other Evergreen stakeholders. For purposes of illustration we offer the following example. I was recently contacted by a graduate student who is interested in addressing food security in towns such as Shelton, Chehalis, and Grays Harbor that are suffering economically. This could form the basis for interdisciplinary action research project-based endeavor with universal implications but was particularly relevant to our region. This important, long-term issue would provide enrollment opportunities as well as learning opportunities.

Basic Laboratory Model

This proposal has been inspired by and is based on the findings of a 5-year enterprise at Evergreen called the Civic Intelligence Research and Action laboratory (CIRAL). Students in the Lab contributed intellectually and emotionally to the evolution of the approach we took and our findings. The following concepts are recommended as part of this proposal. They have mostly been gleaned from our experiences with CIRAL. The various labs might not elect to adopt all of these, but they are in keeping with the objectives of this proposal and they have been mostly successful.

- The labs focus on research *and* action which are defined thematically.
- Projects are developed within this thematic focus.
- Opportunities for participation in labs are regularly and transparently available to students; in other words, specific labs should be *always* available (every quarter, spanning multiple years) or available at regular and well-publicized intervals (every other year, for example)
- Focus on collaborative, student-led projects
- Multiple faculty members can be assigned to a lab.
- Faculty members involved should be remunerated for their time.

Getting Started

To be truly institutionalized, we believe that the research and action laboratory should ultimately be its own curricular type at Evergreen. It could immediately be introduced, however, by way of a reorientation and reframing of other existing curricular types. One or more programs could stipulate that four credits (for example) would be set aside for project-based work and time would be set aside for students to meet. Furthermore, other programs could do the same and students from multiple programs could work together. The Undergraduate Research offering (UGR) could also be used. This approach would make it fairly easy to introduce the research and action labs although faculty currently aren't remunerated for this and other types of contracts or changes in the CBA might be necessary.

One obvious and appealing approach to launching one or more labs would be for Planning Units to offer a research and action laboratory that is primarily coordinated by faculty within that Planning Unit. It would be focused on the interests and needs of its students within the theme of the Planning Unit—while still having interdisciplinary potential. Ideally the various Labs would be regularly offered thus providing opportunities that students could reliably count on and plan for. Although each Planning Unit would presumably have considerable freedom in relation to managing their Lab we recommend a focus on "real-world" applications, collaboration, and broad student autonomy. Significantly, a number of Research and Action Labs at Evergreen could constitute a new network, one that could be designed to help strengthen the individual labs as well as Evergreen's educational mission. For example, the various labs in the network could meet regularly to discuss ways to improve their enterprise and develop shared resources. Although we believe that the various research and action planning unit laboratories would follow the same general guidelines, one of the important aspects of the approach would be the development of some body (or mechanisms or processes) that could help coordinate the research and action activities of the various labs. Although the labs themselves could change over time (thus presenting an

immediately relevant and accessible "natural experiment"), the network that also would be created is also potentially a source for educational and institutional learning. The individual labs as well as the network could be developing toolkits of ideas and resources to help students with their projects.

We also believe that an introduction to project-based work would provide a useful prerequisite to this work and this approach could be integrated within the new effort to regularize program offerings.

Experiences with the Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory
The Civic Intelligence Research and Action Laboratory or CIRAL focuses on exploring and cultivating civic intelligence, the ability of groups to people to address significant problems effectively and equitably. CIRAL has been the source of many of the findings and recommendations in this proposal. Over the past five years students have been engaged in a variety of self-organized project teams (clusters). The Home Office cluster is unique because it runs the group assembly and is concerned with CIRAL logistics. Clusters that have been retired include Media, Digital Story Telling, Journalism, CIRAL vs. Homelessness, Centralia Ambassadors Program, Community Health, Co-ops, Education, Evergreen Revival, Food Systems, Games, Greener Tide, Non-Profits, Open Source Governance, Pattern Languages, and Veterans. Students can work on more than one cluster and typically do; they often will lend a hand when needed, as in our recent So You Want to Start a Non-Profit event. Other projects include Anti Bullying Game, Educational Forum Proposal to Tulalip Tribe / Marysville School System, and business plan for disabled veterans housing. Currently clusters are working on Citizenship Schools, Collaborative Education, Veterans Affairs, and Sustainable Futures.

Closing Thoughts
We believe that an intelligent and enthusiastic adoption of research and action labs at Evergreen could help mitigate some of the problems we're now facing while vigorously embracing Evergreen's core principles and commitment to interdisciplinary, progressive, public education. Introducing research and action labs into our curricular structure would allow us to create deeper, longer-term partnerships and projects. These would more closely resembles "real-life" and thus help prepare students for 21st century realities, from social change to science and technology. It would provide an ongoing venue for social innovation and community involvement.

We believe that research and action labs could provide an educational venue in which students could modify their own conditions of learning. Students would be encouraged to take direction and ownership of labs and help steer them. This would include "paying forward" by contributing resources to help support future work of the labs. As students internalize the missions of the labs and the projects, they increase their *ownership* of the process. They would have the opportunity to play a greater role in curriculum development as well as in the course of their education. The labs would privilege, prioritize, and promote student interest, initiative, creativity, leadership, collaborative skills, and civic intelligence. We also believe that the research and action labs could help provide a fresh and flexible space for faculty collaboration that allows for emergent, light-touch, somewhat improvisational mentoring and teaching. The research and action labs could help us provide more offerings in the curriculum. Moreover, they could help bring more coherence to the curriculum, if they were strategically integrated into the rest of the curriculum. The labs could help address learning needs and perspectives of many students, including, based on my experience with CIRAL, veterans and other "non-traditional" students.

Evergreen can be called an experimental college but its overall structure has scarcely changed since its inception 40 years ago. This proposal is meant to introduce a new entity that is based entirely on existing structures but is explicitly conceived for conscious evolution. Because the labs and the projects can persist over time and because the structure and orientation of the lab itself is explicitly malleable, this approach establishes something like a permanent test-bed for our institution. CIRAL, for example, has provided a setting for considering changes in the Cooper Point Journal, Evergreen's overall health, and the GSU — as well as many of the other issues now facing Evergreen. The structure and orientation of the Laboratories could, for example, help us better understand the role of technology within our educational framework. It could also be used to explore different approaches to experimenting with remote or peripatetic outposts, working with the community or explore working with graduates or other people and groups beyond our region.

Although faculty are already free to offer this type of laboratory, we believe that a solid college-wide commitment to this approach has the potential to address many of the issues we now face, while making Evergreen richer, stronger, more flexible and more amenable to intelligent evolution.

Acknowledgements

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