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The Embryo (Circa 1973)

Raymond College

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The Embryo

In this paper I intend to make several observations and suggestions regarding the Exploration and Inquiry program. The statements are not intended to be definitive but to serve as starting points for discussion among the faculty, and, eventually, the students. They have participated in the development of this program and its operation, and we must not exclude them from plans for its modification.

I assume that the Embryo program will change. It was intended to meet the needs by helping to define their interests. For it to become routine, tradition-bound, or prescriptive would be antithetical to that original intent, because the students' concerns and the student-faculty mix will be changing constantly. While we will continue to be surprised by our inability to anticipate student responses, we should be able to reduce the adjustment time, for the Embryo program is structurally flexible. It only needs alert, responsive, imaginative participants.

My observations will include student responses, faculty responses, and administrative suggestions. Some of the matters which I will mention are quite tangible; other, equally real, approach the metaphysical.

First, I feel that one direction would be sufficient for the Embryo. In addition, the directorship should be a short-term office. The administrative load is not great, except at the beginning of the term and at the times of the mandatory conferences. The burden would be heavier if group leaders and students were conscientious about informing the director of their affiliations; however, the value of such record-keeping is dubious. The workload would be reduced if the interviewing/counseling were done by advisors, as it probably will be with our new counseling plan. If the Embryo program had a budget, as it should have, the director would have a new responsibility. Because financial needs, like academic needs, could not be specifically anticipated, the financial support for this program should be loosely prescribed.

I would like to see more experience-oriented groups, or better still, mobile groups which would integrate the experiences "out there" with the conventional sources of academic growth such as texts, library and laboratory research, discussions, and student writing.

In order to encourage more exploration and inquiry by the students, I think that most groups should be programmed to self-destruct in about four weeks. This is prescriptive, in contradiction to my general desire for the program, but I feel that the value of greater student movement offsets the harmful effect of the prescription.

A number of students enrolled in the Embryo to participate in just one group, which they then regarded as a course. If the group did not continue to interest them, or if it deviated from its original plan, these students felt trapped, for they had no intention of exploring other possibilities. I think that Embryo groups should not be used as "courses," and to that end I suggest that mini-courses should not be encouraged in this program, either as a function of the student's attitude toward his work or the group leader's understanding of his relationship with his students.

This brings me to one of the most interesting and difficult facets of the Embryo experience. In spite of all our statements written to entering students during the Summer and our explanations at orientation, many students did not really understand that they were free to sample a variety of possible areas of interest. They were so authority-oriented that they could not believe that their education was for them, that it was not a task to be performed for the approval of the masters. As we kept telling them this, some grew troubled, because they were not suffering enough and they had always associated learning with pain. Then some of these same troubled students began to realize that it did not have to hurt, that they were responsible for their own education, and that it could even be pleasureable. My point is that it

takes a great deal of energy for the student to turn around in his concept of education, and that we must work much harder to help the student realize these ideas regarding the academic process. A longer, less frantic orientation would be valuable for this purpose.

First, of course, the group leaders should understand how the student-leader relationship differs from that which most of them have known in classroom situations. When some of the students did not do an assignment or show up for a meeting, the response of the leader, in some instances, was to crack down, rather than to attempt to discover better ways of assisting the students. This response was most prevalent among student leaders.

The student leaders, in spite of some early problems in working out their relationships with their students, have generally worked well, especially in activity-oriented groups. In a few instances the leaders have been cavalier in their responsibilities, failing, for example, to show up for individual appointments with members of their groups. We should be more careful in our screening and selecting process.

Toward the end of the semester several groups have broken up, in an unstated, unofficial, unrecognized way. Consequently, those students are unsure of their group ties and unsure about starting a new activity. It would be better, I think, if groups made definite decisions to terminate. In this regard, the programming suggested above would be helpful.

Student and faculty interest indicated that the Embryo should be primarily a Fall program. At the moment I am concerned that we may not have enough activities to meet the needs of those few students (approximately thirty) who are enrolled for Embryo work in the Spring semester.

Before the program began, we were concerned about possible conflicts of interests or attitude for those students taking a mix of area courses and Embryo courses. So far as I can tell, students can handle this mix and, in fact, it provides a good means of their becoming acquainted with the College.

At the beginning of the term after numerous discussions and with some serious dissent, we decided to ask the students to evaluate their own work in the Embryo, regarding both the amount of credit and the written assessment. Students are involved in this process now. My guess is that it will be a valuable part of the first term educational experience.

I shall summarize with a catalog of my observations and suggestions:

1. We should have just one Embryo director.
2. The Embryo should have a budget.
3. We should develop more experience-oriented groups.
4. Groups should be planned to meet for definite periods, preferably four weeks.
5. Mini-courses within the Embryo should be discouraged.
6. We should give more care to screening, selecting, and orientating student group leaders. This is not to mean a suggestion that we should quit using student leaders.
7. We should work harder at communicating the philosophy of Exploration and Inquiry to the entering students and to group leaders. Orientation should last at least one week.
8. The present system of evaluation should be continued.
9. The program should be primarily a Fall activity.
10. Many students have made valuable discoveries about their responsibilities for their education. The response has been generally affirmative, even enthusiastic at times, and no student participant to whom I have talked has radical disagreement with the Embryo program.