

Principles versus Practices

Draft Version

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Author's Note: There is much more to be said than encompasses this document. This document is not intended to give historical overviews, overall critiques of Earlham or the function of its gaps between Principles versus Practices, it is written by a senior right after graduation (which means it was written quickly) to think about Earlham's supposed commitments and why Earlham needs to learn to be more honest.

Introduction

As a college, Earlham is rooted in some profound, deep and moving principles. Glimpsing through its Principles and Practices document one finds five areas of emphasis: Peace and Justice, Simplicity, Respect for Persons, Integrity, and Consensus Governance.

For those who have not carefully read the Principles and Practices document, it is highly recommended to do so. As a vision statement, it is a phenomenal document that has been carefully crafted with the input of all aspects of the Earlham community. It is both insightful and an inspiring document.

Other Earlham publications, from its website to admissions materials, echo the vision one finds rooted in Earlham's commitment to these Quaker-based values. One finds these values lifted up in talks in convocation, occasional Word articles, and elsewhere in the community.

These values define the *principles* that the Earlham community aspires to be (according to the Principles and Practices document). The distance between Earlham's *practices* and these high principles is, however, often a wide gap. This document, written from the perspective of a student, is one attempt to examine some of our practices. I offer them as a reality-check, along with some possible ways for increased accountability and movement to alleviate these gaps.

I believe strongly that honesty must be central to people with high principles. Honesty means not simply internal accountability but openness about how one does not live up to their principles. The practice of true honesty, at every level (personal through public), offers one humility and moves one away from using principles as merely symbolic references for an unattainable, lost ideal, but concrete practices and how they can be improved. If Earlham would share what was going on, students would not need to be as disenchanted as many of them become.

Drinking

One place to start examining the contradiction between Principles and Practices is the common issue of alcoholic drinking on campus. As students well know, this is a wet campus – very wet. Members of *Wellness* – as cloistered as they are – have needed to complain about the problem.¹

A number of years ago, when a report was released with data from Student Development on the amount of drinking, many faculty's response was complete denial. In this regard and its continued lack of willingness to acknowledge its drinking, Earlham is an alcoholic institution. It both has a serious drinking problem and a serious denial of it as a problem. While we publicly talk about being a “dry” (or pseudo-dry) campus, we are not as honest about how deep our problem is.

We need not eliminate our principle, but there is not institutional recognition about the deep level of drinking that exists on campus. The fact first-years can walk onto this campus believing it is dry is unthinkable. And they do.

Yet, even that other first-years have heard about a dry policy and, perhaps by admissions or another student, heard that it is wet is inappropriate. Prospectives should be told the truth not only by word of mouth behind closed-doors. Placing the responsibility of honesty onto individuals instead of the “institution's” face (publications, public speeches, recruitment material) is not honesty.

The truth is that we are an alcoholic institution with a severe drinking problem and, from a student perspective, a denial of how serious the problem is. While I *do* hear teaching faculty or administrators expressing concern to me individually, or while I do hear about some faculty gathering to talk about the issue – I do not hear faculty (administrative and teaching) talking to students publicly about the extent of the problem. Students know the depth of the problem.

Environmental Policies²

As a college our practices emphasizes *Simplicity*. We ask the query, “Am I careful about how I use both human and environmental resources?” We are certainly asking an important question.

How does Earlham answer the question in its practices?

Earlham has left the recycling program for students to run. A student-supported group the Earlham Environmental Action Committee (EEAC) has taken charge in running the recycling program. As an organization, its main goal is focused around

¹ For example, see Audrey Maness' article in *The Earlham Word* March 9, 2001; Volume XV, No. 20.

² This section based on research by Leah Robshaw and Daniel Hunter located in the “Environmental and Social Audit” which can be found on the ESG website or in the Community Action Center. It is also based on personal experience with EEAC.

trying to educate the community and participate in pro-active environmental protection. Unfortunately, much of its energy often gets caught up in structuring, re-structuring, finding support for and understanding the recycling “program” at Earlham.

As a group, it has been trying to get Earlham College to give it administrative support in running the program. However, it has never been able to get the support it is requesting. The Earlham Community Code used to explicitly advocate recycling; since its update to Principles and Practices it has removed this explicit mention.

Every couple of years EEAC, along with members of the community, has attempted to get information about and ultimately remove Tru-Green Chem Lawn. The chemicals sprayed on the lawns every spring break have been shown to have health concerns for people as well as dogs and trees.

Two years ago (1999), over 200 students signed a petition asking for Dick Smith, Doug Bennett and Bill Mullens to release information on the cost of spraying along with alternatives to Chem Lawn. While the cost was released (by a student doing alternate research), the document was never created and, to my knowledge (which does not mean it did not happen!), no research was ever done into alternatives.

Years before that, members of the community complained about the killing of violets, which is also associated with the broadleaf attack by Chem Lawn. Despite a lot of controversy, we continue to spray our lawn at a cost of over \$21,000. There exist alternatives.

Similar failed attempts at encouraging environmental actions have occurred in relationship to using recycled paper in copiers, eliminating junk mail and unnecessary convocation sheets. Why has it been so hard for students and others to advocate for environmental-friendly policies?

Multicultural Affairs and “the Diversity problem”

Earlham’s struggle to get faculty of color, more students of color, include sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy, and deal with the structural prejudice on this campus is long. As an example, for years, an Affirmative Action hiring policy has attempted to recruit more faculty of color – with few results. While the *percentage of faculty of color* has increased, the percent of faculty of color continues to be dramatically low.³

In 1994, the Multicultural Alliance (MCA), an inter-racial group of students, articulated very specific demands for Earlham College to address racism on campus. It was responded by a harsh, paternalistic letter from the President’s office admonishing its

³ As understood from a conversation with Len Clark, Provost and Academic Dean.

use of language. Few of its “needs” – as they later called them – were ever taken seriously.⁴

Seven years later many of the same suggestions are being made by a similar group: the Alliance. All the while Minority Senior Speak-outs have articulated Earlham’s student’s experiences of structural racism.

At the same time, Earlham has continued to advertise itself as a “crossroads community” that welcomes and embraces diversity. The use of imagery is strong in Earlham’s writings. While never mentioning race/ethnicity explicitly (it favors the broader term “minority students”) – much less *racism* – admissions materials present a deceptive image.

David Roediger, when he came to Earlham College, “spoke on how racist assumptions have changed from over time. Now we hear less overtly racist language, but racially neutral language is accompanied by racially charged images.

“‘People say raceless things, but the photographs, film footage is allowed to do the work,’ Roediger said.” He calls this “coding” – communicating about race without ever explicitly addressing race.

The admissions website says that of the Earlham student population:

16% constitute the minority student body
5% international students*

As examples of “coding,” the admissions website** displays:

20% images of *people of color* (a specific group of minority students)

Number of times one finds the words race, ethnicity, minority, African-American, Mexican-American, Latino, Asian-American or any specific racial/ethnic group: 1 time.

The curriculum guide displays about the same percentages of students:

20% images of students of color

And 40% images of faculty of color (the percent of faculty of color is only around 10-15%)!

Instead of suggesting a higher percentage of students of color than exists, Earlham College should present an honest image of the college. If it wants to attract people of

⁴ Copies of these two documents can be found at the ESG website.

* Source: http://www.earlham.edu/at_a_glance.html as of March 17, 2001

** Specifically, all pages one hop from the “Just for Prospective Students”

<<http://www.earlham.edu/prospectives.html>>. Excludes Humanities course listings (which adds 5 words on race/ethnicity).

color, it should be honest about that with prospectives and actively recruit students of color being true to their diversity.

Elsewhere

Earlham has a wide gap in numerous other areas. Other areas include:

- Over-commitment
(i.e. Earlham encourages its members to practice simplicity and yet asks faculty to serve on numerous committees, give lots of attention to students, invite students to their houses periodically, stay current in their fields, and still model simplicity?)
- Commitment to Interdepartmental Majors
(i.e. why is PAGES fighting to keep its department alive while Len Clark has the audacity to stand in front of a PAGES professor's retirement and speak about the college's commitment to interdepartmental majors like PAGES)
- "Consensus Decision-making"
(i.e. why does Earlham talk about consensus decision-making as much as it does when it does not technically even use that process! At best, it uses consensus-building. Either way, most students do not know what it is and most faculty do not see it at work.)
- Conflict Avoidance
(i.e. why is conflict avoidance so deep in an institution that claims to encourage diverse opinions?)
- Sexual Assault
(i.e. why does Earlham talk about supporting individuals and community and yet balked at creating a Sexual Assault Policy?)
- Information Sharing
(i.e. why does Earlham say information sharing is essential to its governance structure and yet most publications regarding decisions, such as the Gazette, are not widely accessible by the non-administrative sections of the institution? Or as another example, why was a 6% tuition increase hidden from students for weeks while it was shared with professors, staff, administration, the board?)
- College Governance
(i.e. why do students and faculty feel kept out of decisions by not understanding the structure or why are committees' decisions over-turned?)

Integrity about the Gaps

Each of these gaps has its individual explanations, rationales, or reasons. But my experience has been there are general themes in each of these gap locations. For one, there is rarely (if ever) honesty about the gap. That is, Earlham would not admit that it is

vastly alcoholic (much less that the Earlham hash run is one of the few places where students initiate moments of silence!). It does not.

Nor does it, in any public way, explore how it is not living up to its environmental policies. By public this means that nowhere does Earlham challenge itself in public (relative to Earlham) forums – i.e. Word articles, convocations, admission’s materials, opinion board in Runyan.

Conversations do happen in closed doors. Around diversity, for example, Len Clark would admit that there were places Earlham still needed to grow in one-on-one conversations. But he has, to my knowledge, never made such an honest statement in a public setting.

Instead, the assumption is that if a committee is created to address the problem that is equivalent to acknowledging the gaps. People tend to not experience that. Instead, they will accuse the “administration” of ignoring the problem. If members of the administration (specifically Presidents and Vice-Presidents) do not admit there is an issue and that they are working on the issue, the feeling, especially common from students and faculty, is that the administration (and therefore the institution) is ignoring the issue.

Committees are not sufficient. Students’ who speak at the minority senior speak-out have reported that they experience Earlham as entirely ignoring their concerns, despite creation of committee after committee. For years they have spoken out about issues yet have never had their issues reflected. Instead, what they have reflected has been Earlham’s assertion that it is dealing with diversity – this without acknowledging the problem and the history of the problem. Naming is something that Earlham should struggle to do. Naming is part of honesty.

Creating another committee, without admitting mistakes, failures and shortcomings will consistently prove insufficient. That groups working on diversity have been created throughout Earlham are testimonies to the fact that Earlham’s creation of committees is not sufficient. Or creating behind the scene policies without public disclosure results in frustration from those working for change.

Earlham’s struggle centers around fulfilling its testimony to honesty. Without honestly admitting the reality of the problems, Earlham has been forced to discount experiences of members of the community with severe concerns. Unless honesty is instituted, Earlham’s gaps will result in deeper and deeper disenchantment among a generation that admires integrity and discounts rhetoric. And so the call for honesty, transparency, and integrity will grow from disenchanted members of the community until they are wholly dispirited or listened to.