

NANCY KOPPELMAN

# Think about Your Thinking

## Reclaiming a Foundation of Liberal Education at the Evergreen State College

PERSPECTIVES

IN THE MIDDLE of the seventeenth century, René Descartes pondered a piece of wax. He imagined it first solid and then melting. He realized that even when the form of the wax changes, the form of *knowing* the wax does not. Descartes had a world-transforming insight. He wasn't really thinking about the wax; he was thinking about his own thinking. He grasped the implications of this imagined

experiment—I think, therefore I am—and,

by extension, proposed that every human being is also a “thinking thing.”

In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrator secretes away a pat of butter from her dinner tray. When she knows she won't be found out, she uses the butter, which has started to melt, to moisturize her skin. Her Cartesian moment comes when she realizes that the repressive regime that imprisons her body also threatens her ability to think rationally. Thinking about her thinking—about the butter, and about the remnants of the free society she once enjoyed—enables her to hold onto her rational self even though the world has gone mad. She also realizes that thinking isn't enough; she must tell her story. “I tell,” she says, “therefore you are.”

Both of these insights, one from a real thought experiment centuries ago and the other from an imagined dystopian future, affirm the high value of habitual critical thought. In our own time, colleges and universities in free societies are trusted to foster that habit through liberal education. Critical and self-reflective inquiry are intentional activities and require practice; students' other accomplishments

depend on them. For Descartes in his “stove-heated room,” the handmaid in the stark bedchamber where she waits to be summoned, and our students in the classroom, thinking about one's thinking is important. Descartes' insight changed the world; the handmaid's enables her to know herself even though circumstances conspire (unsuccessfully) to prevent her from thinking her own thoughts. At our colleges and universities, thinking one's own thoughts is at the heart of all the other activity that, together, constitutes a liberal education. Self-examination and reflection enable people to make sense of the world and their places in it. Each individual can experience the mind as it grasps its own dynamics and spawns deep and unique understandings that can shape life on purpose.

### Student academic statements

In 2011, the faculty of the Evergreen State College, a public liberal arts college in Olympia, Washington, decided that this activity—thinking about one's thinking—is so important that we ought to make time in the curriculum to help students learn how to do it well, and how to tell the stories of their thinking. We instituted a new graduation requirement: each student will write an academic statement about her or his college education. Students begin this reflective statement during orientation week when they first enroll and, as their fund of knowledge grows, annually rework it with faculty guidance. Periodic revisions enable students to consider carefully how their liberal education bears on one of the central responsibilities of citizenship: making public commitments to their communities and to the future. By the time they graduate, students will have created transcript-ready statements that

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demonstrate how they think about their thinking—not about wax or butter, but about the shape and significance of their college education.

This new requirement extends and deepens an old Evergreen practice. Before the college first opened its doors in 1971, the founding faculty decided to evaluate student work with written narrative evaluations rather than letter grades and grade-point averages. We are already accustomed to helping students write, regularly and in depth, about what they learn in college. The academic statement, however, casts a wider net than an evaluation of a specific course of study. Its aim is to enable each student to capture, in a single culminating 750-word document, the trajectory of her or his education as a whole.

A primary aim of liberal education is to prepare students to be responsible citizens. Taking this annual pause to think about their thinking enables students to consider broadly how their education bears directly on the lives

they are planning for themselves. Writing about their thinking creates a link between their private reflections and their public commitments. It elevates the craft of committing reflections to paper into a responsibility that marks the passage from college student to college graduate. Each final statement will be the unique testimony of a student's thoughts about how accomplishments, decisions, turning points, breakthroughs, and even lucky accidents, culminated in graduation from the college.

In the spring of 2012, in preparation for instituting the new graduation requirement in the fall of 2013, the college held a writing contest so students could try their hands at creating academic statements. The three winners were quite different, and quite surprising: as Descartes and the handmaid discovered, thinking about one's thinking yields remarkable insights that simply cannot come otherwise. One student wrote that her college education taught her that everyone dies, so

she had better learn as deeply and as comprehensively as she can and make every moment count. Another, an immigrant from Afghanistan and mother of four, wrote about the many obstacles she had to overcome (including the language barrier) in order even to enter a college classroom. Once she did, she fell in love with chemistry. And a third stumbled into college as an indifferent student but became ethically ignited by studies in history, politics, and economics. He is now enrolled in law school at the University of Michigan. The other hundred entries likewise impressed the selection committee with their consistent expressions of enthusiasm, sense of purpose, and acute appreciation for how higher education figures into students' life plans.

Most striking of all, the essays showed that this new initiative addresses a real need that students already know they have. Students are hungry for opportunities to consider seriously how a college education intersects with their broadest concerns as human beings—as members of families, of small communities, of professions, and of the *polis*. They are accustomed to looking to the future and attempting to find their places in it. The academic statement brings a degree of intellectual rigor and a sense of civic responsibility to that worthy endeavor. It also links students'

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self-reflection with the faculty's commitment to guide students through their educational journey. By offering ongoing advising workshops throughout the school year, Evergreen's

faculty will steward the practice of reflection and writing, which will yield transcript-worthy academic statements.

**Broad applicability**

Colleges and universities in the United States have a high commitment to the liberal arts. Some colleges, like Evergreen, were founded explicitly to champion the habits of mind that are central to liberal arts education. Fortunately, the principles of critical thinking and broad exposure to a wide range of fields of study are infused throughout our higher education system. Any college or university in the country can help students cultivate the habit of thinking about their own thoughts, and to do so in service of civic and ethical goals. Students need time and faculty support to learn the skill of finding and declaring their public commitments. Institutional structures—scheduling demands, departmental pressures, credit distribution requirements, and the like—should not be obstacles that prevent students from doing the valuable intellectual work of articulating the overall significance of their learning. Especially given recent and widespread critiques of the value of higher education, no one is better positioned than students, the beneficiaries of higher education, to show what their efforts to learn are really about for them, and that the endeavor is exceptionally worthwhile.

Students at all our colleges and universities have something in common: they are trying to figure out their lives. All colleges can create structures explicitly designed to help students become active and committed citizens who know how to reflect carefully on their own ideas. Thinking about one's thinking is a crucial step that serves these aims and realizes them in practice. □

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