

Academic Affairs Speech
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I appreciate the opportunity to address the Assembly this afternoon in my current role as Dean of the College. The fact that I am addressing you today is the direct result of the wisdom of the framers of the original Assembly Constitution, who decided back in 1980 that the President and the Dean should each offer such an address annually. I think it's fair to say that most of those talks have been both informative and appreciated by the Assembly. I hope that will be true of this one as well.

I'd like to begin my remarks by mentioning and briefly describing several Shimer projects of which some of you might not be aware. I'll then take some time to talk about larger questions – questions about how Shimer is doing and where we're going as an academic institution.

For the past couple of years, the faculty has been engaged in an intensive study of the role of visual texts in the Shimer curriculum. Through a \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for a now-concluded two-year project entitled "Great Books, Great Art: Integrating Art History into the Liberal Arts Core Curriculum," Shimer faculty members have been working together to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the written word and visual works of art. Detailed accounts of this work have been presented to the Assembly by the project director, Barbara Stone, in her State of Academic Affairs addresses in 2005 and 2006. I won't repeat them here, as those addresses are available on the Shimer website. The NEH-sponsored study has also led to the introduction of new art-oriented materials in several core courses and to the launching of the "Great Books, Great Art" website. The website is a work in progress, but it's coming along well, and it can be accessed through the homepage on the Shimer website. If you haven't yet looked at that site, I recommend that you do. On behalf of all of us, I offer sincere thanks to Barbara, as well as to Stuart Patterson and Harold Stone, who have done the bulk of the work on the "Great Books, Great Art" website thus far.

Our graduate course of study, the Teaching Fellows Program (or TFP), began operations in Loveland, Colorado this semester. The TFP consists of a series of graduate-level courses intended for primary and secondary school teachers. Course materials have been

developed over the past couple of years by members of the Shimer faculty in conjunction with another high-quality educational institution, the Core Knowledge Foundation. Original source materials are used wherever possible, and many of the courses have borrowed heavily from our undergraduate core curriculum. Classes are small and discussion-based, which is to say, typically Shimerian. More information on the TFP is available via the Shimer website, or from Jim Donovan, Director of the Hutchins Institute, or Barbara Bogart, the Teaching Fellows Program Administrator.

Closer to home, we're working on various possibilities of collaborating academically with IIT and, to a lesser extent so far, with the VanderCook College of Music. In addition to the cross-registrations that seem to have yielded a number of positive experiences for those Shimer and IIT students who have taken advantage of them, the Academic Planning Committee (APC) is investigating possibilities for joint Shimer-IIT degrees. The subcommittee that is working on these possibilities will be submitting their findings to the full APC at our next meeting later this month, after which the APC's subsequent recommendations will be forwarded to the faculty. Members of the IIT administration have expressed interest, even enthusiasm, about opportunities such as these. These programs will not detract from our core curriculum or affect Shimer students who don't wish to participate in them, but we hope they'll attract students to Shimer-at-IIT who might otherwise choose to enroll elsewhere. I've set a goal of signing off on two or three such programs sometime during the current academic year. We are also working with IIT staff on other jointly-sponsored programs, such as a lecture series and movie nights.

The Shimer faculty is taking on an initiative that is based on our growing awareness that the percentage of seniors who have completed their theses during their final years in residence at the College has been declining. Granted, there have always been a few Shimer students who completed all requirements for graduation except for the thesis, and we have tried to stay in touch with them and support them in taking that final step. Now, however, those "all-but-thesis" students have grown beyond the bounds of "few." In fact, there have been as many in the new millennium, the past seven years, as in the previous 20. As a consequence, the faculty has committed itself to work intensively during the current year with former students in this category who are interested in completing their Shimer degree. An invitation has gone out to each of them, and the response has been very encouraging. We hope that this effort will result in the

conferring of degrees on some very worthy former students, and to a large graduating class at our 2008 Commencement, which, by the way, will take place on Saturday, May 10.

There is, of course, much else going on academically at the College these days, far more than I can discuss in the brief time allotted for this speech. Besides, I am mindful of the fact that no one comes to Shimer for the privilege of listening to long lectures. I would therefore like to concentrate the rest of this talk on a few matters that concern Shimer's present and future.

In recent years, there has been a good deal of discussion at various levels about the Shimer College mission. That mission, as approved by this Assembly many years ago, reads as follows:

The mission of Shimer College is education – education for active citizenship in the world. Education is more than the acquisition of factual knowledge or the mastery of vocational skills. It is the process leading away from passivity, beyond either unquestioning acceptance of authority or its automatic mistrust, and towards informed, responsible action.

The mission of a college is to perform an academic, or at least substantially academic, matter. In light of this, I feel compelled to challenge the Assembly to consider the implications of our mission statement and the extent to which we are fulfilling it. On this count, I have recently felt challenged myself by the words of Nate Lefebvre, who will be graduating from Shimer when he completes his senior thesis – which will be in the next few months, God willing. In the prospectus for his thesis, Nate writes that Shimerians are very good at thinking about and discussing the theory of everything, citizenship included. “However,” he writes, “there is more to active citizenship than just critical thinking: there is *action*, or praxis, and that seems to be the area that the Shimer community is the least apt in. Never in my life have I encountered a brighter, more intelligent community of people than at Shimer—and, by the same token, never before have I met a more apathetic group, either.” And, later: “Here at Shimer we place so much emphasis on the theory, the thinking, that oftentimes we get so caught up in the debate that we forget to act afterwards.” Broadly speaking, I share Nate's concerns, and I believe that a proper understanding of our mission should induce all of us to share them.

What does it mean to be a citizen at Shimer? I would say that some of it has to do with the ways we orient ourselves to each other, and in that respect not much appears to have changed since we left Waukegan. Our system of internal governance is intact, as today's meeting

indicates. It's evolving in ways that are hard to foresee, but that has been the case for many years. We continue to handle matters like cleaning up our space out of consideration for others, if not in an exemplary manner, at least as well as we did in the good old days. But, to the best of my knowledge, we're not doing all that much to show that we regard ourselves as citizens of a larger community. Granted, we've added an Assembly representative to IIT's Student Government (and Lance Dyke deserves our thanks for his excellent service to both institutions in that capacity over the past year), but I wonder about our awareness of and orientation toward wider service to the local community in our new setting. The after-school tutoring needs here in Chicago are much greater than in Waukegan, where we ran a modest but successful after-school program for a number of years. There are many other issues that could also be addressed: the environment, health care, the political climate, and so on. I hope that some of us will take leadership roles in searching for and providing opportunities in these areas as we get increasingly settled in our new digs. I'm encouraged to learn that more students are doing community service in conjunction with the Federal Work Study program than in the past, a trend that I hope will continue. I regard such outreach as part of what it means for us to be active citizens in the world.

Next I would like to talk about the student body. To put it briefly, it is generally very good in quality, but not in quantity. This is, of course, nothing new for Shimer, but it has a number of implications which were noted by my predecessor in the Dean's Office, Barbara Stone, in her address to the Shimer Assembly two years ago, just before the decision to move to Chicago. Here are some of the things that Barbara had to say at that time. "Small enrollment limits the number of elective offerings each semester. And, even though some may love it, it guarantees having the same fellow students in class after class, over and over again. Yes, it can be argued that it forces one to learn to get along better; but it can limit the entry of new ideas and perspectives. In addition, these enrollment figures have major implications for the question of faculty size in the coming years. Today, not counting off-campus faculty members, we have 11 faculty members teaching in the Weekday and Weekend programs. None of these are less than 40 years of age, and the ratio of senior faculty to junior faculty is 9/2. Looking to the future, we are reaching, or have reached the time in which some of our senior members of the faculty may be looking towards retirement. Additionally, other faculty members will be requesting Leaves of Absence as a time for renewal, and to explore other opportunities. Yet, because of static and/or declining enrollments, limitations are now placed on the hiring of new faculty. This is the second

year in which we have not brought in new faculty members, nor do I anticipate that this will be possible next year, wherever we are.”

Two years have passed since the Assembly heard Barbara speak those words. Thus far, the situation she addressed remains largely unchanged, as our enrollment decline has continued, albeit very slowly. As a result, instead of 11 fulltime faculty members, we now have only nine, due to the fact that one junior faculty member was denied promotion to the senior faculty and another has retired since Barbara addressed the Assembly in 2005. Since Stuart Patterson became a member of the Senior Faculty this year, the ratio of senior faculty to junior faculty is now 9/0. It has now been four years since we hired any new fulltime faculty members, and it is doubtful (although possible) that we will be doing so this year. That doesn't mean that we will not have any faculty faces next year that you're not seeing this Fall. Barbara Stone will be teaching a course in the Weekend Program this spring and is likely to return to fulltime status next year; and Steve Werlin, who has spent the past three years in Haiti working on literacy, dialogue, and other aspects of education, might also return. But those additions, welcome as they will be if they occur, don't fulfill all the longer-term needs of the College.

Any institution needs a regular influx of new blood and new ideas, or it devolves into mere stasis and eventually into decline. While the current Shimer faculty is competent and dedicated beyond any reasonable standards – in fact, I would say almost beyond belief – it cannot sustain itself, or the requirements of the living growing organism that is Shimer College, indefinitely. We need new faculty members, ones who will bring fresh perspectives. And for that, we need more students. That increase in enrollment must be fairly gradual, or we will find ourselves bringing in new faculty members more quickly than we can reasonably orient them toward Shimer's unorthodox ways. But the increase must come fairly soon, or the problems we face will fester.

There are other problematic implications of our small size. In the address from which I just quoted, Barbara mentioned the issue of electives. Tutorials are also a problem. Simply put, at our current size and with as few faculty members as we have, we are in no position to offer more than a handful of tutorials in any semester. This has led to some tension between student desires, especially in the Weekday Program, and the response of the Dean's Office on this matter. That tension is also, I believe, due to a general lack of understanding about the nature of

tutorials. In order to bring us closer to a commonly-informed perspective on this issue, I'd like to quote you a passage from the *Faculty Handbook*:

The label "tutorial" is given to non-Core courses in which the material under study is so much within a given faculty member's area of expertise that the faculty member's role is to act as a guide for the interested student....The faculty member's task in teaching a tutorial is to provide the student(s) with a starting point and research materials, to conduct weekly meetings, and to receive regular papers from the students which are to be shared with others in that tutorial, if any....The Dean also must approve the actual offering of a tutorial in a given semester.... Faculty members are not compensated financially for directing tutorial work.

As that description indicates, tutorials at Shimer are intended for the study of academic topics in which the faculty member in question is so proficient that he or she does not need to prepare for each session, but only to “act as a guide for the interested student.” This is partly due to the fact that directing tutorials is unpaid extra work for faculty members, who already have extremely heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities. While there are a number of courses, both core and elective, that any fulltime faculty member is qualified to offer, there are relatively few for which we have the depth of background to direct in the manner entailed by the aforementioned description. In conjunction with the fact that we offer electives based largely on student interest and that tutorials are readily available to those who avail themselves of, and are accepted to participate in, the Shimer-in-Oxford Program, it is to be expected that tutorials on this campus will continue to be in short supply for at least the foreseeable future. Of course, higher student enrollment will lead to the hiring of additional faculty, which will make more tutorial opportunities possible.

So, when will we actually see higher student enrollment? That's not my department, but I am optimistic that it will happen very soon. My optimism comes primarily from the remarkable, perhaps unprecedented, number of serious inquiries and applications that are coming into the Admission Office these days. I'm reminded that when Shimer moved from Mount Carroll to Waukegan in the late 1970s, enrollment declined for a couple of years before increasing very substantially. It seems quite likely that the same thing is happening to us as we settle in here in Chicago. I am however concerned that this increase is not reflected, at least so far, by any substantial activity in the Weekend Program. Student enrollment in that program is now as small as it has been in more than 20 years. We have not enrolled more than three new

students in the Weekend Program in any of the past five semesters, with the result that we have only 14 currently-enrolled Weekend students who are candidates to return to Shimer next year – that is, who are not expected to complete their coursework this year. We need new blood in that program, and we need it soon. One short-term solution would be to expand the placement of Weekday students in Weekend courses, as we are doing with Natural Sciences 3 this semester. However, in my judgment, it's not in the best interests of the College in general or the Weekend Program in particular that this sort of plan becomes permanent. Another possible solution is the hiring of an admission professional with successful experience in adult education, as is envisioned by the Renaissance Project.

I would like to close with some reflections about Shimer's place in the larger academic world, a world from which Shimer has historically secluded itself. The thoughts I'm about to offer were largely motivated by the decline of Antioch College, a small liberal arts college in Ohio that's even older than Shimer. A few months back, Antioch shocked the world of higher education by announcing that it would be closing its doors at the end of this academic year. While that decision is now being reconsidered, it is a fact that Antioch has declined in enrollment from some 2400 students 30 years ago to about one tenth of that number today. It is also an undeniable fact that, in the world in general during that time, the large have grown larger and more prosperous while the small have struggled.

Is there a moral in all this for Shimer?

Some of you know Peter Temes. He is a member of the Shimer Board of Trustees, currently chairing the Educational Affairs Committee of the Board. He is also the former Dean of the Antioch New England Graduate School. He knows both Shimer College and Antioch College very well. When we discussed academic matters at Shimer last month, I asked him if he thought there were any lessons from Antioch's demise that would be helpful for Shimer. He responded by telling me a story. Before he left Antioch, he had an informal conversation with one of the key members of a "save the school" committee on which Peter was also serving. During their chat, Peter stated that the only long-term virtue in an institution of higher education is academic quality. When the other man replied, "No, I don't think so," Peter came to suspect that Antioch was not long for this world. "Antioch didn't know what it was," he went on. "It had lost its sense of educational mission, its soul. That's a problem Shimer will never have."

In this talk, I've pointed out several of the problems that we at Shimer currently face. We need to address those problems soon, or court the possibility of their becoming really serious. But my talk with Peter Temes also reminded me how fortunate we are to be part of such a remarkable and worthwhile educational endeavor. It reminded me that we at Shimer embody a set of academic virtues, ones that we bring to life here every day. We have good reason to be proud of our intellectual integrity, our climate of mutual concern, and our dedication to the contemplative life – hopefully not at the expense of the active life. We can be grateful that, after nearly six decades of Great Books, small classes, and nonstop discussion, we've never felt compelled to revise our core mission and drift into the chiaroscuro of trying to be different things to different people, which would ultimately erode our sense of educational mission. Hopefully, as Peter Temes said to me, that truly is one problem Shimer will never have.

Thanks for listening.