

Academic Affairs Address  
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The Assembly Constitution requires the Dean of the College to deliver a State of Academic Affairs Address to the Assembly at this time each year. This provides an opportunity for me, or for whoever is serving as your Dean, to help give members of the Shimer community an overview of current academic programs and issues here at Shimer. I hope that what I have to say today will help those present get a better understanding of the academic state of the College.

I'll begin by discussing course offerings. Last month the Academic Planning Committee of the Assembly, or APC, decided to ask all Shimer students, via an electronic survey, to indicate interest in possible elective courses. We then sent a second round of that survey, asking students to select electives from a list based on responses to the first questionnaire. We received responses from about 30 students on the first survey and from more than 50 on the second, an electronic turnout that helped the APC immensely in its deliberations.

We are planning to offer 6 electives next term – a small number, but more than we have offered in any semester in the previous two years. That number remains small because there are simply not that many students who need electives, especially in the Weekend Program. Given our current size, and with as few upper-level students and faculty members as we currently have, we are in no position to offer more electives next term, particularly ones for which prerequisites are needed. For next year we hope to offer more, but considering that the 2010-2011 Shimer-in-Oxford Program is likely to involve a sizable number of our upper-level students who will thus take their electives as tutorials in Oxford, that might not be the case.

For next semester we will need to provide options for students who need non-core courses, and we're doing that. As usual, we'll be offering several tutorials, non-core courses in which a member of the Shimer faculty works with a

small number of students, never more than three, on a subject in one of the faculty member's areas of expertise. Tutorials are normally open only to students who have successfully completed the Basic Studies Comprehensive Examination, or Basic Comp, which is usually taken after the student's first two to four semesters in residence at Shimer. Almost all of the Weekday students who need (as opposed to want) electives next term are qualified to take tutorials. The tutorials we will be offering, in conjunction with the aforementioned elective courses and options such as taking courses at IIT and/or the VanderCook School of Music, should suffice for all Weekday student needs, although not all student wants.

A few minutes ago I mentioned the Shimer-in-Oxford Program, which we have been offering in alternate years for most of the past 30 years and almost every year for the 15 years prior to that. We would like to believe that we are approaching the stage where this program will become an annual event. In order for us to go this route in the near future, we need to be assured that a large number of students who will not be qualified to participate in the program next year are interested for the following year, 2011-2012. If you're in that category, please fill out the form that next year's Director, Stuart Patterson, has distributed concerning the Shimer-in-Oxford Program and return it to my mail slot by Monday, November 30. If you're interested in the Oxford Program but don't know what form I'm talking about, ask Stuart or me. The APC needs this information by the end of this month in order to undertake any sort of coherent planning for the Oxford program, including planning for next year's program.

During my last two State of Academic Affairs addresses, I spoke with some concern about the future of the Weekend Program. Last year at this time, I reported that five new regularly-matriculating students had joined the Weekend Program that semester (Fall '08), the highest new-student enrollment in the program for any semester in the past four years. However, I remained concerned about overall enrollment in the Weekend Program, which continued to lag below 20, a number as small as at any time in the previous two decades. When I was

asked in the question-and-answer period after last year's address what level of Weekend enrollment would be sustainable, I replied that I hadn't crunched the numbers but then hazarded a guess that 30 was probably about right. Since then, with the able assistance of Don Moon, I have crunched the numbers. I'm pleased to report that the break-even level for the Weekend Program turns out to be much closer to 20 students than to 30, and I'm even more pleased to report that, since we have now enrolled 5 new Weekend students in each of the past 3 semesters, we have now exceeded that level. We have several prospective and reenrolling students who might be enrolling in the Weekend Program for the Spring 2010 semester, in addition to which the APC will soon be reviewing a couple of requests for transfer from the Weekday into the Weekend Program. All this should help buttress the number of Weekend students. Still, while there's good reason for optimism, there's no reason for complacency. With 7 of our 23 current Weekend students headed for graduation 6 months from now, we need to continue to enroll new Weekend students to ensure the vitality in student numbers that we already have in intellectual quality in the Weekend Program.

I would like to briefly mention Shimer's graduate program, partly because I'm sure it will come as a surprise to some of those present that we *have* a graduate program. The Teaching Fellows Program, or TFP, consists of a series of graduate-level courses intended for primary and secondary school teachers. Original source materials are used wherever possible, as is always the case at Shimer, and many TFP courses have borrowed heavily from our undergraduate core curriculum. We are offering two TFP courses this term, tiny ones, with 3 and 4 students respectively. As Shimer is in no position to undertake its own degree-granting graduate program, we have been keeping this program alive while waiting for the past year to hear whether Roosevelt University is willing to approve the TFP courses as part of their Masters Degree program in Educational Leadership. I'm pleased to report that Roosevelt finally granted that approval a couple of weeks ago. This will allow us to appeal to teachers who are interested in

enrolling in Shimer's graduate courses but who are only willing to spend time and money on them if they will lead to an advanced degree, which we ourselves are not currently in a position to offer. Whether we can actually reach those sorts of people and persuade them to enroll in our graduate courses is as yet unknown. If you'd like more information about this program, please contact Don Moon, who is serving as graduate program director.

Many of you are aware that the faculty has recently begun the process of comprehensively reviewing the core curriculum. This process takes place every ten years. It entails extensive research and meetings during which the faculty reviews the entire core curriculum and decides what to keep and what to change, based on faculty expertise and experience teaching at Shimer. The last couple of times we've done this, the process has taken more than a year from start to finish, as I expect it will this time around. It will come as no surprise when I tell you that core course readings at Shimer tend to be pretty uniform – that is, the syllabus for the Natural Science 1 course that many of you have taken or are taking in 2009 is very similar to the one that a Shimer student would have had who took Nat Sci 1 in 1999, or for that matter in 1979. As the ten-year period between full-scale reviews of the core curriculum goes on, the faculty starts to make selected changes and to do some experimenting, at least in some courses, with the approval of the Dean and in some cases the rest of the faculty. The ten-year review is a way for the faculty to come together to note what's been done over that period, to assess any experiments, to bring newer faculty members such as Stuart Patterson and Bev Thurber into the review process, and ultimately to renew our commitment to the curriculum as a unified faculty, with whatever is changing and whatever is remaining the same being part of that commitment.

At the end of the process, we of course preserve a lot more than we change, which is hardly surprising given the type of college we are. But we do make changes, sometimes pretty substantial ones, as a result of each tenth-year review of the core curriculum. Because we're still at such an early stage in the current

process, I have no idea where it will lead or what is likely to change or remain the same. That's part of what's exciting about it. Of course, we'll keep you posted as the curricular review evolves.

Speaking of Bev Thurber, this is the first year in the past five in which Shimer has welcomed a new faculty member. Bev's hiring has been a very significant step in preparing for the future of the College. Our faculty is wonderful but aging, and new blood is critically needed. This concern has become increasingly urgent, as several members of the faculty are nearing or beyond retirement age and it takes time to integrate new people into Shimer sufficiently well to ensure a level of continuity when the "veterans" retire. Eileen Buchanan's recent surgery, and her concomitant inability to complete her teaching assignments this semester, is cautionary in this respect – and, to put it perhaps more starkly than propriety would suggest, Eileen is not the only member of the Shimer faculty who has cancer. In addition to factors of age and health, the faculty depends on new arrivals to refresh the perspective that is brought to teaching and assessment of the curriculum. Thus, the enrollment increases of the past two years that led to Bev's hiring have been most welcome. The same holds true with respect to another new faculty member, Christian Holland, who many of you met when he interviewed last spring. Christian will be teaching in the Weekend Program next semester and joining us fulltime in the Fall. It is vital that faculty hiring continue, particularly if student enrollment continues to rise as projected in the next few years.

Finally, I'd like to make a few remarks about college governance. It's a timely issue, as the agenda for today's Assembly meeting attests. As I stated in email messages to the Board and the internal Shimer community a couple of weeks ago, the changes in college governance that were ratified by the Board of Trustees and by this Assembly in the spring of 2008 are less extensive than appears to be commonly supposed. With respect to academic governance, the lack of changes to the Faculty Constitution and to the description of the APC in the

Assembly Constitution at that time indicates that the authority of the faculty and the APC over the academic life of the College has been constitutionally preserved. This means that matters such as the nature and content of the curriculum, the electives we offer, the sizes of our classes, our practices and policies for the hiring and retention or non-retention of faculty, the development and continuation of academic programs, and other such matters remain in the hands of one or both of those bodies. While the President formally serves as Chief Executive Officer of the College and the Board of Trustees has ultimate legal authority, sound governance practices for academic institutions suggest that neither would intervene in academic matters except on rare occasions, and even then only in unusual circumstances.

There's much more that I'd like to tell you about the state of academics at Shimer, but time is short and we have much else to discuss today. I hope that this address has helped members of the Assembly understand, at least in broad outlines, some of the current aspects of academic life at Shimer that, on the one hand, go beyond the classroom, but on the other are vital in informing what we do in the classroom. Thank you for allowing me to serve as your Dean, and thanks for listening.