

## **State of Academic Affairs Speech**

**November 13, 2011**

At Shimer, the Dean gives the State of Academic Affairs speech in the fall and the President gives the State of the College speech in the Spring. In the Fall speech, the Dean usually reports on major curricular changes, and then on whatever is on his or her mind regarding academics at Shimer. That varies from year to year depending on whether we are moving, for example, staying put, or whatever the major academic issues in the life of the college are. I will take the same approach. But before I start the “report” end of things, I want to thank everyone for welcoming me so heartily to the Dean’s Office, for being so patient as I readjust to the office, or when I answer a question with “you know, that’s a really good question, I need to think about it a bit before I can give you an answer”. I also want to thank others for their willingness to help out with all sorts of things, whether it be a student making a visitor feel welcome and escorting him or her to class or lunch, or a student talking with another student who is reticent to talk in class, or a faculty member who has agreed to take on an additional tutorial, judge a contest or research a topic. This kind of graciousness reminds me of why we are here, what kind of institution we aspire to be, and the values that we share in common. It makes me grateful that this is the College where I serve as Dean and where I have chosen to spend most of my “adult” working life.

This year’s report comes at a very interesting time: We’ve now been in Chicago for five years and in May we will be graduating the first large entering class of students who were “recruited” in Chicago and have never known Shimer in any other home, though they may have of course made the trek to Mt. Carroll or Waukegan at some point in their time here. Waukegan now has really become a part of Shimer lore. Some faculty have retired, some are thinking about it, we have now hired 4 new members to the faculty in the last 3 years – which is a sizeable percentage of the current faculty - and the student body has been growing by about 15% in each of the last few years. This year also marks the 10 year period when the Shimer faculty completed a review of the entire curriculum, which will be a major focus of this talk and of a community-wide discussion this Tuesday. I should actually clarify the previous sentence. The curriculum review will be the major focus of Tuesday’s discussion; today I will focus more on a couple of other changes that the faculty made in conjunction with the review. Some of these changes will be implemented immediately, others within the next couple of years. There are a large number of

other academic matters that are discussed in the curricular report, as well as the larger Self-Study, that I don't have time to address here. So take a look at both of these documents. They have been emailed to everyone, there are some copies on the floor, and the curricular review is also the Appendix to the Self-Study Report. I want to publicly thank David Shiner for his work in leading the faculty through this curriculum review as well as through the other ones of recent decades

Curricular review is a lengthy and thorough process. Given the small size of the faculty and the large scope of such a project, the faculty needed to decide where it was going to put its major efforts. This ended up in a narrowing process – we began with many proposals as to what our focus should be, and then prioritized to a narrower set of issues. Some of these decisions were motivated by internal interests, some by external pressures. A few things are particularly noteworthy about the process and our focus this time around. In brief, faculty felt that the role of economics in the curriculum needed to be reviewed; it was clear that we needed to have a “written record/itemization” of the experiments and laboratory exercises in the Natural Sciences so that we could move beyond an “oral tradition,” in large part dependent on Don Moon, who had chaired the Natural Sciences for decades; and, it was clear to the faculty that Humanities 4 needed a major overhaul. “Four level” courses present their special challenges since they include many modern and even contemporary texts, and one doesn't have the longer historical perspective to know exactly which topics and texts are enduring and will withstand the test of time. The faculty has also been concerned for years about the level of math literacy, and to some extent about the uneven quality of the senior theses. In addition, based on feedback from the last visit of our accrediting agency – the Higher Learning Commission – it became clear that we needed to articulate and agree on learning objectives and methods of assessment for each course, each area, and then the entire curriculum. And, we also reviewed all the course descriptions while we were at it.

As you can imagine, working through this number of issues was not an easy task, especially given some strong personalities and views of individual faculty members regarding individual courses, specific readings, or even the larger scope of the curriculum. This was an immense task; we've been working at it to some extent for a couple of years, though much of the finalizing of the report took place this past May and June. The entire faculty will have a couple of seminars later in the year to discuss some of the new readings that have been added. There were certainly moments of disagreement and tension – how could there not be given the scope of

the assignment – but we now have before us a document that the faculty “stands behind” and that will serve as a guidepost for the coming years.

Along with the changes to reading lists which students will notice in the next couple of years, and a new approach to Humanities 4 – the first “experiment” will take place this spring – I just mentioned two important curricular changes which will impact current and incoming students: Math Literacy and the Senior Thesis. I’ll take these two topics in that order. The situation of math literacy has vexed the faculty for decades. Historically, Shimer students have been more “verbal” or “philosophically-minded.” There is lots of evidence to support this: lower scores on the math sections of standardized tests such as SATs or ACTs for entry students and GRE scores for graduates; few students take the Natural Sciences Comprehensive Exam, and few graduate with a degree in the Natural Sciences. We certainly have had, and have our share of math and science oriented students, whether it be an alum who recently visited and had just earned his PHD in astronomy, or the latest statistics about alums that show a sizeable percentage are working in the fields of medicine and healthcare. And it is noteworthy that enrollment in statistics, calculus, and bioethics is on the increase, and students are taking math and science courses at IIT. But it has generally been a problem, especially when it becomes clear that a student can barely follow the basic math in the Natural Sciences and IS2 readings. Math Workshops in the Weekday Program have been a way to try to remedy the situation, but passing these courses has never actually been a requirement for graduation. Students have, for the most part, willingly and graciously, on occasion a bit resentfully, taken these workshops and usually passed the test, which suggests a readiness to work with the basic mathematical concepts in the curriculum. On occasion a student hasn’t completed or passed the test, and to be honest, there has been nothing that we could do about it.

This is about to change. Beginning with the Fall 2012 incoming class, students in both programs will need to pass a Math Competency Exam prior to taking Nat Sci 3 or IS5 and thereby demonstrate their “competency” to study advanced texts. If you have passed the placement exam or pass Math Workshop this fall, you will have satisfied the requirement. In the future, incoming students will be informed of what will be on the test, and sample exams will be available for them to study. There will be no “surprises” or “mystery” about what is on the test and how it will be conducted. This should bring an end to “I just would have needed a bit of review if I had known what would be on the test.” We recognize that students with weak math skills may need additional help to prepare for the test and they will be given guidance through

student tutors, referrals to various websites and other resources. And David Lukens, who has been teaching the Math Workshop courses for years, is working on a book to assist students in gaining a deeper and fuller understanding of math.

Secondly, the senior thesis. The faculty has had concerns about the thesis for quite a while. Some theses are very strong and exemplify a student's best work. Others are weaker, even marginal, definitely not the culmination of a student's studies at Shimer. Some students have had difficulty completing their theses on time and haven't allowed enough time for revision and polishing. We have "tweaked" the process a fair amount over the years – adding time during IS6 for students to work on their theses, making adjustments in the calendar and what has begun to feel like endlessly clarifying dates by which drafts and theses need to be submitted if a student wants to have any chance to graduate. Fortunately the number of ABT (the so-called "All but the thesis") students has lessened over the years, but there are still some. The thesis is a very difficult assignment for students because of its scope, length, and the need to define and narrow down a larger topic. Yet the faculty still has not been entirely satisfied with the process.

Beginning in the 2013-14 academic year, the senior thesis will become part of the core curriculum and will be awarded a letter grade, just like all other courses in the Core. The credits will be divided over the two semesters. We have been able to do this without increasing the total number of required core course credits, which would have had the effect of reducing elective course requirements. We have removed IS1, Integrated Studies I: Analysis Logic and Rhetoric, from the Core Curriculum. It has been "on the books" for decades, but we have not offered it for a number of years. Students have received credit for this course once they have successfully passed Soc 1 and Hum 2, but since recent students have not needed the course, this has turned into "bonus" credits. This change will be implemented in Fall 2013 so that students aren't earning credit for IS1, Thesis Prep and Senior Thesis. In addition, the faculty recently reviewed the policy around thesis defenses. Here, there have likewise been great disparities in the quality of the defenses, the quality of the theses being defended, and in some cases, the appropriateness of a thesis defense based on the scope of the project. Given the increasing sizes of graduating classes and the fact that theses defenses are public examinations, the faculty has determined that "entitling" every student to a defense does not serve the students or the College well. Some years only one or two students have wanted a defense, sometimes more, and they have been able to get the thesis done by an early date of submission. However, the faculty could find themselves in a position of having to prepare defenses for twenty or more seniors; for numerous reasons this is

unmanageable. Therefore, at the October 18, 2011 faculty meeting, the faculty changed the policy regarding the senior thesis defense from “Students have the option of oral defense of the senior thesis” to “Students have the option to apply for the oral defense of the Senior Thesis.” The faculty will then need to determine annually which ones merit a defense, and what is a reasonable and manageable number of defenses to host. The faculty will be generous about this – there is much support for them – but it also wants public defenses to be held as appropriate, in regards to topic, quality and manageability.

And now to a “lighter” side of things: the naming of a new classroom. It’s been about 20 years, probably more like 30, since we have named a new classroom. The classrooms in Waukegan, other than Hutchins, had the same names as these ones, with one additional one – The Conference Room – not the most exciting name, I might add. Other than Hutchins, an obvious name for a Shimer classroom, the names have been irrational numbers – we can thank Don Moon, who I mentioned above, for this. I think everyone has found this rather charming and distinctive. Over the holidays the office in the southeast corner of the floor – where Janet Henthorn has been for years, my former office, where Eileen is now – will be converted into a classroom, And, we need a name for it. This will be a two step-process, which will combine academics and fund-raising. In brief, keep an eye out for an email with instructions in the next couple of days. Community members will submit names. Daniela Barberis, Jim Donovan, and Stuart Patterson will serve as faculty judges, hopefully deem 3 names as acceptable, and they will be submitted for voting – a dollar per vote by community members, alumni, and friends of the College. Whichever name gets the most votes i.e. money will win. This is Shimer style: avoid having a classroom named after a donor; instead, come up with some acceptable options and hopefully make some money along the way. I don’t think I need to say much about the need for an additional classroom; it is a reflection of the growing student body and need for additional classroom space, but also of the large number of electives that we are offering in the spring semester

Lastly, I need to turn to the visit of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in early December. A visiting team of four will be here on campus December 5-7 during Writing Week. Much of what they will be doing is looking at our administrative processes, our finances, and our plans for the future. Visiting teams vary; they always meet with the President and Chief Officers, they confirm claims we have made in the report, they always meet with Board members – with

local Board members and a few who will be flying in for the visit – and they usually meet with some students and faculty.

I have been asked by some students how they can be of help with the HLC process. I offer here an answer to that question, and I will be frank: this is a somewhat sensitive subject, but I trust everyone in this room to take what I am about to say in a positive and thoughtful way. Shimer students and alums, probably faculty and staff too, but here I'm focusing on students, and not only on Shimer students, but students at all the so-called Great Books schools are often described as "arrogant" or "excessively proud" about their educational experience. I can surely understand why. The Shimer curriculum is very rigorous and demanding, and it challenges students from arrival on campus to graduation. This arrogance and pride is something that the previous Visiting Team in 2006 (before most every student in this room attended Shimer) picked up on, and this team will have read the previous report. I'm going to quote a couple of sentences from that visit: "It would be difficult to find an institution where the mission has more pervaded the institution than at Shimer. Individuals understand the mission of Shimer College to an amazing degree. Not only the mission but the Great Books process, have been internalized by the students to the point that they dismiss other techniques as insufficient or even unworthy"..... and later: "Interviews of Shimer personnel, students and alumni indicated that there is a high level of pride in the Shimer program... some of which is merited. However..."

So I want to say a few words about humility. Hutchins' vision of a Great Books education is one of life-long learning, which by definition implies a great amount of humility. These are texts that are worth studying over a lifetime. Most of us have had the experience of looking back at a text read early on in the curriculum, and then rereading it or reviewing our notes later and saying to ourselves: What was I thinking? How did I get that out of that text? or, I guess I was pretty biased at the time or really into X. In this process we become aware of our limitations and recognize that we have a lot to learn from others and that our readings change over time. So, it's not only about the books you've read, or about the best curriculum, but more importantly, it's about what you do with this education. Do you use it for good ends? Do you take the values and skills which we practice in the classroom such as patience, listening, and generosity, and practice them for the rest of your life? Or do you take the curriculum and lord it over others? And even over academicians who are also proud of their institutions such as members of the Visiting Team? Your answers to such questions will determine how you will be judged by others throughout life, how you will judge yourself, and how the HLC visiting team

will judge you as students and all of us as a community. I therefore ask you to think and speak as I hope you do daily in class, asking yourselves how, whatever you say, will come across to another person. Be judicious, careful, thoughtful, intelligent and passionate as you all are. At some recent Assembly meetings the question came up as to what qualities student Board members or student members of the Presidential Search Committee should have. I remember the word “judicious” being used a lot. It seems applicable here too. Be judicious. That’s what we ask of you.

Five years and one day ago, to be precise, I gave my last State of Academic Affairs Speech, a few months after the College moved to Chicago. It was a difficult time, with declining enrollments, an aging faculty, and the exhaustion of the move and adapting to our new home. In that speech, I wrote the following:

“We are inquisitive about the world around us, and are constantly thinking about how to make the best of our own lives, and those of others, on this planet. There is little about the world as it is that we take for granted. And yes, there can certainly be some stubbornness, even resistance, about entertaining new points of view – whether it be that of an author in a text we are reading and discussing, or that of a fellow classmate or faculty or staff member. That I’m certain of, but we’re pretty good at helping each other get over stumbling blocks. We may not always succeed, but we certainly give it our best effort, much more than most other groups of people. We remain true to our central mission, small discussion classes centered on original source readings. As has been the case ever since Shimer College adopted the Hutchins curriculum in 1950, alums, current students, former and current faculty share this experience with one another and can talk across the decades, regardless of space or place.”

This continues to be the case at Shimer. We have a strong and well-defined educational mission, and the most recent curriculum review guarantees that it will continue for the coming years. Enrollment is on the upswing and we have brought new faculty to the college. We have good reason to be proud, to be very proud of this – but we also have even more reason to be careful of what we do with our pride.

Thanks for listening.