

## Summary of Roundtable Conversation

David Quigley's concluding call to "encourage students and faculty alike to think about our academic vocation as calling us toward an enriching wholeness" (see above, page 12), together with John Cunningham's observations about the core "from above" and "from below" elicited a great deal of reflection among the Roundtable participants, organized here in four categories: the silo; emerging needs; formation; and integration.

First, participants noted the balkanizing tendencies of a strictly disciplinary approach to the professoriate, most commonly referred to as the "silo." Much of university culture today is structured around this approach, a by-product of the modern system developed after the model of the University of Berlin in the early nineteenth century. This approach is standard in most graduate programs, which train the future professoriate: researchers train students in the methodologies of a discipline, point them toward its prestigious journals, and upon hiring, exhort them to publish or perish. The most significant faculty formation then happens within the academic department during a professor's first six years leading to tenure review, and the very strong emphasis is on the publishing record. Teaching is a secondary or tertiary concern, and some professors will see the intrusion of students upon their research or writing time as a distraction.

There are a number of consequences of this silo approach to university life. Some professors do not seek out core courses with many students because of the demands of regular teaching and grading. Their courses often look more like introductions to a discipline and its methodologies rather than broad, engaging attempts to make sense of the perennial questions facing human beings. Often the most well-published, tenured professors will retreat to courses with a handful of graduate students so they can devote more time to research and writing.

At the institutional level, the silo approach has led to conflict between departments, with faculty pitted against each other for access to funding or space or hiring. One participant noted, for example, how common militaristic language is (like "turf war") in administrative conversations. More broadly, the silo approach impacts the impression of what higher education is for, a question discussed earlier after the presentations of Thomas Plante and Kevin Hughes.<sup>1</sup> If a university culture emphasizes disciplinary excellence at the expense of conversation among scholars with different disciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> See *Integritas* 2.1 (Fall 2013).

lenses, intellectual life suffers, and it fails to address the major intellectual developments of the past 150 years, let alone the past 3,000 years. So a key question that emerges in view of the silo approach is whether departmental cultures within a university can support mission questions.

Recognizing the weaknesses of the silo reality, Roundtable participants identified a number of emerging needs. Following John Cunningham's lead, some noted the ways that students themselves raise questions that transcend disciplinary lenses, and can sometimes drive curricular changes "from below." Many raise philosophical questions driven by wonder at the world, seeking answers that transcend disciplinary lenses even as they experience anxiety about how to make a living after graduation. If their experience of core courses (which are often the last opportunity they will ever have to study a given discipline at length) is that they are about training future professionals in the field rather than exploring perennial questions facing all people using a given discipline, most will not find them to be particularly formative. On the other hand, courses that raise the big questions—and offer students opportunities to pursue them using a number of disciplinary means—may have a dramatic impact on the way students understand the world. Kevin Hughes's description of the "fourth hour" dedicated to fostering the connection between the curriculum and students' lives underscored the existing limitation in a purely disciplinary approach to education.

Yet participants lamented that there can sometimes exist pockets of deep mistrust across the various sectors of a university: animosity between departments that perceive others as competitors; coolness between divisions of academic and student life; and criticism of divisions of university mission and ministry. Silos may be bad, but moving beyond them can prove difficult.

One participant observed that students are aware of dissent among faculty ranks when advised about the core from flippant comments about getting this or that requirement "out of the way" *en route* to the "more important" disciplinary courses sends the message that the core curriculum is little more than a *pro forma* exercise rather than a curriculum that will help students come to greater wisdom about how to live well. If faculty commitment to the core is unclear—or even met with hostility—students are more likely to fall into the assumption that college life is really about training for a profession with some other courses of questionable value thrown in. What is necessary, most agreed, is a strong sense of the desired outcomes from the core, especially in the face of pressures within disciplines to increase student access to upper-level courses. We must ask what ultimately is in the best interests of the student.

Formation was a focus of much of the conversation; the sense that, echoing Thomas Plante's presentation, Catholic higher education is for not only professional training but also transformation. Recalling the historian of the early Jesuits, John O'Malley, one participant observed that the early Jesuit institutions used the Humanities to help students learn how to be a certain kind of person, even employing the fine arts to cultivate an imagination of how to live. Following their lead might mean, for example, focusing

more on how to teach—how to reach students in the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood—rather than on the specific content of a curriculum. If formation is the main goal of a university education, though, that would suggest a demand for the very best professors in the core curriculum: those that are steeped within a discipline but able to reach beyond it to invite students to consider the most fundamental questions of how to live. If our curriculum is to be compelling, it must address not only how practitioners of a discipline do their work but also how such practitioners can help them make a good life in all its many facets, including who their students are in the classroom and on Saturday nights in their residence halls.

Recognizing these challenges, one participant called for new “structures of integration” in the university. Another participant cited a study that alumni can be allies in this regard: 10 years out, they understand more fully the impact of the core curriculum than they did when hitting the job market, and have a stronger sense of how a grounding in the liberal arts has helped them discern what kind of life to live. What is needed is a compelling vision of what the core intends to accomplish in order to attract faculty to the prospect of taking a formative role in the lives of young men and women. Several participants agreed that such a vision could be very attractive to many, though it would be necessary to think about how to reach others whose training in a “graduate school mentality” persuades them that their work is primarily in a given field and not in student formation *per se*.

There are several structural difficulties that obstruct integration. Most prominent, observers noted, is the existing reward structure, which does not emphasize good teaching. One participant noted that having full professors in core courses has been shown to impact rates of retention of students. A challenge for many institutions is to recruit faculty who are at the frontiers of their disciplines and able to interact with people of other disciplines. Given the current culture of departments, and the training of new faculty within departments, it is difficult to imagine how to encourage a broadening of professors’ fields of inquiry. One participant questioned when it was time to throw in the towel, since some of these questions are not new. Another suggested that perhaps having one mission-aligned person in each department might be a beginning of developing a greater sense of integration in the curriculum. A third pointed to the example of Bob Moses, who championed student access to math education as a civil right, suggesting that it is possible to see disciplinary excellence as contributing to a higher good both of individuals and society as a whole.