

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The members of the Roundtable appreciated the evidence that Thomas Plante provided to support the claim that the liberal arts continue to be an important dimension of Catholic higher education in the United States. In response to a question about whether the liberal arts were a necessary part of all Catholic universities, though, one observer pointed out that many Catholic institutions around the world are not, in fact, founded upon the liberal arts. She observed that a commitment to a liberal arts core is characteristic of U.S. Catholic universities, one which some others around the world seek to emulate—one newer example being that of Benedictus College in London.

There were three directions of commentary upon Plante's and Hughes's presentations. The first amplified the observations that the liberal arts continue to provide a foundation upon which contemporary U.S. educational goals can be built: this direction can be called the *foundational*. In contrast, the second direction might be described as *antagonistic*, referring to conflicts between professors of liberal arts and other disciplines, especially professional ones such as business and technology. A third direction might be described, borrowing from a phrase of one of the participants, as *integrative*—referring to the idea that the liberal arts are part of an integrative formative process that challenges contemporary assumptions about the goals of education.

Several commentators affirmed the foundational approach, citing observations from their own work as advisors and administrators of students seeking to balance inquiry and career goals. One shared his experience with recruiters on campus who worked with elite schools, most of which were not faith based. The recruiters reported that students from the elite schools often outperformed students from the Catholic university in sheer quantitative skills, but that 10 years after graduation it was the students from the Catholic university that emerged as leaders. Another example came from a participant whose students often were the target of tech recruiters who did not recruit as aggressively at a prestigious private, non-faith-based university down the road. Their report, he shared, was that the students at the Catholic university were more capable of taking criticism and developing innovation and imagination. Several participants agreed that some measures of education, such as salary upon graduation and immediate post-graduate employment rate, were myopic. On the whole, the foundational approach drew broad agreement that it was important not to place the liberal arts into a position of competition with the applied arts.

In contrast, several participants pointed to the antagonism between liberal arts departments and pre-professional departments such as accounting, finance, computer science, and business. Battles over core curricula as well as related issues, such as the hiring of adjuncts or graduate students to teach liberal arts core courses, suggested to some that economic considerations often drive curricular decisions, and that trying to compete with pre-professional departments (whose funding is sometimes driven by numbers of majors) is a Sisyphean exercise.

In spite of what many professors of liberal arts hold as a romanticized understanding of their disciplines, many Roundtable participants agreed that even in an age when parents and students enter college with economic concerns, it is important that Catholic colleges and universities maintain the belief that a flourishing life involves one's work but is not reducible to it. There are indeed liberal dimensions of work: engineering ethics, compassionate business models, and so on.

The third direction of commentary was summed up when a participant called for a new "structure of integration" in Catholic universities, a sense that the Catholic vision of higher education is indeed transcendent precisely because it is rooted in the virtues cultivated by a study of the liberal arts. What we do is formation of students and of communities of inquiry for the sake of a good world. Commitment to that formation may be on the part of a philosopher or an economist: it may be embedded in liberal arts courses, but it may also be embedded in conversations about how to use technology or predict market swings. The integrative approach is an ideal that calls for new university structures to make a more pervasive reality. Nevertheless, participants were naming an emerging reality that they see around them: a need for collaborative approaches to education that break down the walls between schools and disciplines, reaching toward a holistic model of personal formation regardless of a student's or researcher's primary focus of study.

Underneath all these questions lay practical considerations. One participant noted that students may come in wanting to study philosophy but cannot see the practical way to make that happen without compromising her after-graduation choices. Another participant observed that too often we fold the ideal of formation into volunteer programs, thereby raising the question of whether Catholic colleges and universities differ at all from non-faith-based universities which also valorize service to others. The liberal arts may have transcendent value, but at the same time they are the objects of study of real people with bills to pay.