

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The Roundtable participants spent much of the time following Bill Mattison's and David Quigley's papers considering what, concretely, wisdom means in the context of the contemporary college or university. There was general consensus that wisdom points toward an integrating wholeness in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, that it arises out of a desire to avoid a fragmentary or limited approach to education. Yet several participants raised questions about what such an approach to wisdom might mean for the ways that people at Catholic institutions actually undertake their daily work. How might different faculty actually situate their work and their relationship to their peers within a context of desiring wisdom? How might a broad desire to pass wisdom on to students impact teaching?

On a practical level, several participants agreed that there are obstacles to a desire for integrating wholeness, such as dedication to a specific guild (in contrast to a dedication to the mission of the university) and the exigencies of tenure review, which emphasizes publishing within the guild at the expense of active citizenship within the university. These burdens fall especially on younger faculty who are trying to figure out a way to balance the demands on their time during a formative six-year process. Others pointed to the demands of particular disciplines whose practitioners often evince an indifference to the institution at which they are invited to practice them. In response, one participant pointed to the usefulness of a mission statement, crafted as an invitation to academics to consider that what they are doing is already contributing to the mission of the university. In the face of offering professors what amounts to a lifetime contract with tenure, he suggested, it is important to even begin a larger conversation about mission, even if such conversations are not always fruitful.

Another participant focused her remarks on a point in Mattison's paper, namely his analysis of the place of the emotions in the moral life, noting that disregard for emotion has sometimes fallen on women. She went on to suggest that an appreciation for emotion might open up a greater respect for the broadly human dimension of all inquiry, in contrast perhaps to an overly clinical or objective treatment of data. In support of her point, another participant observed that the field of economics has often been conflated with business, thereby losing a moral dimension, especially in this "second gilded age." Economics, she averred, would benefit from conversation with other disciplines, focusing on the question of the human good.

Turning to students and faculty, other participants observed that emotions play a part in the way that faculty care for students. Ultimately, a good faculty member wants his or her students to become good people, not just good researchers or practitioners of a discipline. Skills and competencies are good; but wisdom, understood as a life well lived, is more important and more expansive. Further, there is a transcendent dimension to wisdom. There is a sense, following the imagery of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, of a divine chorus, which can be compromised by the loss of transcendence and the accompanying turn to the self and its immediate desires.

The conversation returned to the question of wisdom, and the concrete question of how to invite members of different disciplines to speak and listen to one another, to value one another. One participant observed that the key question is how to have a college—in the medieval sense of a community of shared living and study—within the context of a German research university. There must be tradeoffs, a point recalled by the conversation about the costs of starting up science labs today.¹ Catholic colleges and universities are underrepresented among the best science programs; yet they are well represented among the best business programs. The key point, said another participant, is that Catholic institutions can be places where researchers model wisdom in the work they do, the way they interact with students, and the way they integrate knowledge.

Such integration is what students of different majors desire when they come to college. Whereas most faculty prize critical thinking as the most important outcome for students, a significant majority of students studied by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA desire religious or spiritual integration.² Professors may not see the language of philosophy or theology as relevant to their work, but students do, and hope that their professors can model what it means to live an integrated life. One participant mused that it would be fascinating for students to hear the kind of presentation that Marc Muskavitch gave at the Roundtable,³ and to invite a theologian to raise questions on what contemporary genetics lends to an understanding of original sin. In addition to the substantial conversation about genetics and theology, students would witness the fruits of intellectual friendship and hospitality—and perhaps, more fundamentally, come to know more personally two people who seek an integrating wisdom in their lives.

1 See “Summary of Roundtable Conversation,” *Integritas* 3.2 (Spring 2014).

2 See “Spirituality and Higher Education,” a National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose, at <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/>.

3 See Marc Muskavitch, “Genetic Determinism in the Post-Genomic Age,” *Integritas* 3.1 (Spring 2014).