

“The Idea of the Catholic University in the 21st Century”

March 15-16, 2018

ABSTRACT:

Twenty-First Century Humanities

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We propose to address the status of the Humanities in the teaching context of a Catholic college in the early years of the third millennium. Although we share a widespread concern that the Humanities are under siege, underfunded and intellectually denigrated, our paper approaches the status of the Humanities from a different angle: how might we collectively conceive a Humanities curriculum adequate to the teaching mission of a Catholic college or university in the twenty-first century? Although we have our own ideas about what the content of such a curriculum could be, our paper focuses on mission-driven initiatives shaping conversations on our campus about what the Humanities might become.

The central inclusion of Humanities in general education/Core Curricula bespeaks a vague expectation that study of the Humanities has a role to play in the cultivation of self, an expectation often expressed in the mission statements of our institutions. However, the faculties of our colleges and universities no longer share a unified sense of how study of the Humanities contributes to that end or of what the content of that study should be. Divergent views on the purpose and content of the humanities need not cripple our curricula. In fact, we embrace the prospects these disagreements open for reconceiving a third millennium Humanities.

At the same time, we recognize a gap between the disciplinary initiation of graduate school and a vocation teaching Humanities to undergraduates at a Catholic college. Graduate programs are designed to groom scholars and teachers within particular academic disciplines, not to advance broader pedagogical aims of the Humanities. We thus argue for the importance of formation and collaborative opportunities to help us imagine the Humanities for the twenty-first century, thinking with and beyond our disciplinary training. Such conversations should not be limited to colleagues in the Humanities, as the Humanities at their best have always been in dialogue with other disciplines.

A number of mission-driven opportunities on our campus promote such discussions. We set the context by introducing programs designed to invite the entire community into the project of Jesuit higher education, including the Ignatian Forum and workshops based on *Conversations* magazine. We then consider the contribution made by a senior capstone course that fostered radically interdisciplinary dialogue—among theologians and poets and scientists and others—on the nature of being human in the third millennium. Finally, we discuss a faculty travel seminar, a colloquy on what the shape of the Humanities should be in the twenty-first century.

For us there is intellectual excitement in these endeavors, but also a strategic dimension. In order to convince students, parents, and other stakeholders of the importance of studying the Humanities, we need to have a shared sense of purpose, as well as a shared sense of excitement about what the Humanities might teach undergraduates at our Catholic college about being human in the twenty-first century.